

# **Wicked Karnival**

## ***Halloween Horror***

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*Dedicated to the memory of*  
***James Helkowski***

On October 8<sup>th</sup>, we lost one hell of an artist and an incredible human being. Our heartfelt prayers go out to James' family. Rest in peace, James — you'll be sorely missed.

# Welcome to the Karnival...

I've heard that Hallowe'en is the second-most "profitable" holiday after... What's that other over-commercialized holiday?

Ground Hog's Day... Yeah... Right... That's it.

For years I've been grousing, tongue only partially in cheek, about how we've lost the true meaning and spirit of Hallowe'en. Hell, we don't even spell it correctly, because the correct spelling is *Hallowe'en*, with an apostrophe between the Es because the word is a contraction for "Hallowed evening", the night before All Saint's Day, November first.

So what is the *true* spirit and meaning of Hallowe'en?

You may find at least part of the answer to that question right here in this special issue of *Wicked Karnival*.

In ages past, people actually believed the spirits of departed ancestors lingered on, and on the night before November first, they would come back to their family homesteads to pay a little visit. People walking the streets late at night on October 31, not wanting to cross a potentially angry or evil spirit, took to wearing masks as disguises so the dead would confuse them with other dead folks on their way home after a long eternity in the grave.

What?... You don't believe in ghosts and goblins and ghouls any more?

Even if you don't believe—and I think you might be being a little foolish not to hold open the possibility—you obviously still enjoy the creeps, the thrill, the frisson of a good, creepy tale. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here. I'm talking tales that will take you by the throat and start to squeeze, applying pressure ever so gently until your breathing stops...

Wicked, huh?

Well, friends, that's what *Wicked Karnival* is all about. People often bemoan the fact that we can't feel and act like it's Christmas all year 'round. I guarantee the stories you'll find here in *Wicked Karnival* will convince you that, no matter what time of year, there's a little bit of Hallowe'en always lurking just around that dark corner...

So read and enjoy, and Happy Hallowe'en!

—Rick Hautala

**I LIVE FOR THIS SHIT!**

I Live For This Shit!

## A (BLOODY) LOVE LETTER TO THE HORROR GENRE

By James Newman

*"Welcome to my nightmare  
I think you're gonna like it.  
I think you're gonna feel like you belong."  
-- Alice Cooper*

*"Be Afraid. Be very afraid."  
-- The Fly (1986)*

*"Come play with us, Danny. Forever . . ."  
-- Stanley Kubrick's The Shining*

**So I've been asked on more than one occasion** why I write about "doom and gloom and death and violence." Why I harbor this obsession with things most folks don't like to think about. Ya know, with "that sick and twisted *horror* stuff".

Obviously, when such a question is asked, it's loaded with condescension. It's spoken with a peering-down-the-nose expression (if you're reading this, you undoubtedly know the expression I'm talking about—I'm sure you've seen it at some point yourself). But screw it. Doesn't bother me. I'm not ashamed of my beloved genre one damn bit. And I'm about to tell you *why* I dig this stuff, as best I can (be sure to check out the footnotes at the end of this essay, by the way, for further insight, humorous asides, and assorted fanboy ramblings) . .

\*\*\*

Almost everyone I know "likes" horror movies [1], at least to some extent. They see them as something to pass the time 'round Halloween,

## James Newman

when there's a case o' Bud in the fridge and the kids are done trick-or-treating for the night and there's nothing else on the tube. To these folks, I believe, horror is little more than brainless entertainment. Something to laugh at. To look down upon, as if the movies and novels of this ilk are only slightly better than (gasp!) *pornography*.

So what does that say about *me*? Like the title of this essay says: I LIVE FOR THIS SHIT. Yeah, I said it again, and I'm proud of it! So does that mean there's something *wrong* with me? With you "weirdos", who share my love for all things dark and demented (yes, I'm talking about you too), you wouldn't be perusing this fine magazine in the first place if you weren't *One of Us*, now would you?

Hell, no. Just 'cause I dig this stuff—just because I wear *Night of the Living Dead* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Hellraiser* T-shirts as part of my every-day attire—doesn't make me some psycho child-molesting necrophiliac in drag.

One thing I do *not* do is molest children, thank you very much.

But seriously, lemme tell ya . . . I consider myself to be a decent fellow, for the most part. I have a good job, have held the same one for twelve years now, in fact. My legal record is (nearly) spotless. People like me. People *respect* me, I'm proud to say—perhaps now more so than ever, following the publication of my first mass-market novel (this despite the fact that many of the people in question would never *think* of giving said novel a chance, as they immediately assume it's one of those nasty ole' HORROR BOOKS [2]). I've been married to the most beautiful woman alive for a little over ten years, and we have one son, Jamie, who is about to start first grade. I don't do drugs (anymore—my *Requiem For a Dream*-esque addictions to nicotine and caffeine notwithstanding).

And last but not least, contrary to popular belief, I *can* step into a church without spontaneously bursting into flames [3].

Perhaps this all sounds like I'm making excuses for my love of the macabre, as if I'm "apologizing" for the way I am—but I assure you nothing could be further from the truth. Before I got off on a tangent, I decided in this little essay to tell you a bit about why I'm the way I am. No pop psychology here, no analyzing why people love to be scared—you've heard all of that before anyway, right [4]? I just thought it might be fun to give you one horror nut's history on how I came to love this spooky stuff—

--why I'm "sick", as more than one person has labeled me in the past.

Why would someone say such a thing? Well, *usually* it's all in good fun. I've never really taken *offense* at such a jab (not enough to punch the accuser in the mouth, anyway . . . yet). But then, why classify me as

## I Live For This Shit!

“sick” just because I enjoy reading books and watching movies that deal with the darker side of life?

Makes 'em feel safe. *Sane*. That's what I think.

Because everybody wants to feel sane, don't they, in a world made crazier every day by such depressing realities as cancer, AIDS, terrorist attacks, inflation, and those infernal boy bands [5]? What kind of person *chooses* to dwell on death and darkness and things other folks don't like to think about?

Hmm. . .

Well, for starters, some really good people. *Normal* people, contrary to popular belief. Who woulda thunk it: doctors, lawyers, social workers [6]. Fathers and wives. Professionals! Less than .001 percent of them, I betcha, are those psycho child-molesting necrophiliacs in drag I mentioned earlier.

As far as *I'm* concerned, I think it's my father's fault I adore horror so. I've blamed him on more than one occasion for my being the way I am (he usually chuckles when I tell him this, sports the proudest, shit-eating grin you've ever seen, as if he's just discovered the cure for cancer), so why stop now?

Thanks, Dad.

No, really. I mean it.

*Thanks.*

I remember when I was merely four years old, my father took me to the movies to see *The Incredible Melting Man*. I haven't seen that film since, and I'm sure if I revisited it now I'd find it to be nothing more than a gooey hunk o' B-movie trash [7], but my memories—blurred by time and hundreds of better movies since—suggest that it was one of the greatest genre films ever made. It's called *sentimental value*, baby. I can vaguely remember covering my eyes as we watched *The Incredible Melting Man* . . . but always peeping through, just a little . . . terrified to see what nightmare-creature might lurk up there on the big-screen, but at the same time even more horrified at the thought of missing a single second of the carnage before me! Vaguely, I remember some running, stumbling man-monster swathed in filthy yellow bandages, his crimson skin leaking through the bandages as he slowly melted down to nothing, like some grotesque, human candle. That is the sole image I recall from *The Incredible Melting Man*, but it will always—ALWAYS—stick with me. I trembled and I quivered in my seat; I knew that dripping fiend would surely get me when I crawled into bed that night, and then I would start to melt just like him. . .

. . . yet I *could not* turn away.

Because, man-oh-MAN, this shit was *cool*!

## James Newman

God only knows why dear old Dad thought it wise to take a toddler to see something like *The Incredible Melting Man*. A case of really bad parenting, some might claim? Maybe. Probably. But I say, "Perish the thought." 'Cause every time I sign a contract with a publisher for a new horror tale of which I'm especially proud. . . for every delicious shiver that runs down my spine when I read a creepy scene in the latest Bentley Little or Douglas Clegg novel. . . every time goosebumps stipple my forearms during those last few nerve-wracking minutes of *Ringu* or *The Blair Witch Project* or *Rosemary's Baby*. . . that's when I peer back on what started all this.

And I subconsciously thank my father.

'Cause, Dad, you started all this. For better or worse.

I like to think for better.

\*\*\*

There have been other, similar incidents that fueled my obsession with this genre—that "planted the seed", if you will—though none compare to the aforementioned viewing of *The Incredible Melting Man*. There was John Carpenter's *Halloween* at the drive-in theater [8] when I was only five or six, and that same director's remake of *The Thing* in a hotel room one stormy night on a family vacation [9]. I also recall *Poltergeist* fitting in there somewhere too, as well as *The Fog*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and of course that most terrifying film of all time, *The Exorcist* [10].

As far as the first *novel* I ever read in my beloved genre (adult novel, I mean—all through my childhood I tore through anything and everything featuring the slightest bit of "darkness" [11], as if I have to tell you), that honor belongs to Anne River Siddons' *The House Next Door*. What a wonderful, get-under-your-skin novel. I've re-read *The House Next Door* several times since, and it stills affects me the same way it did that very first time I read it in junior high. Ms. Siddons' novel is, in my opinion, one of the finest haunted house tales ever written. Her prose pulses with a constant sense of dread, and the story's horror builds oh-so-subtly from page one right up through its not-so-happy ending. If you haven't read this one, *please* give *The House Next Door* a shot. You won't be disappointed. It's fairly easy to find (especially at those wonderful old used book stores), and I promise it will stay with you forever.

Anyway. . .not long after reading *The House Next Door*, I discovered the master: Stephen King. Mr. King's novels *Cujo* and *Christine*—two of

## I Live For This Shit!

my favorites to this day—were what made me decide I wanted to be a writer, in fact.

And so I say to Mr. King: Thank you too.

In some strange way, I suppose, you were my second father figure

\*\*\*

Horror is a genre that has kept me pumped with adrenaline for almost thirty years now. It has given me a world in which to escape when reality gets to be too much. When life seems too overwhelming, when the bills start piling up or the boss just chewed out three-fourths of my ass for something that might not have been my fault in the first damn place. . . what better way to push it all aside than to play voyeur to Seth Brundle's far *worse* problems, in David Cronenberg's *The Fly*? Or to laugh at Ash's bumbling, *splatstick* escapades in the *Evil Dead* trilogy? What better way to forget about it all than to take a week's vacation at Bentley Little's *The Resort*. . . or go cruisin' in that sweet-as-sin Plymouth Fury called *Christine*. . . or fight off hoards of the undead alongside your fellow everyman, Robert Neville, in Richard Matheson's seminal *I Am Legend*? Step away from the real world for a while, my friends, and pray that a van full of harmless hippies guilty of nothing worse than believing in astrology and picking up hitch-hikers ultimately survives that most terrifying ordeal in the annals of horror film history: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Everybody needs that now and then, I think. To get away. To flee from the trials and tribulations of the real world. To vicariously experience, through the eyes of fictional characters, adrenaline-pumping scenarios that could (hopefully!) never happen. . .

If only to reaffirm why we are here.

And to appreciate the fact that. . .

Well. . .

As the saying goes: *Better him than me*.

\*\*\*

In closing, just let me say that I love to “embrace the darkness” (to paraphrase Clive Barker's *Lord of Illusions*). And I suppose I always will. Why try to explain it to those who could never possibly understand?

It's a gift, this obsession. For those who have been "chosen". For those of us—this elite community of proud horror “freaks”—who choose to receive it.

## James Newman

Live it. Love it. But don't ever try to push it away.

Because, for those of us "obsessed" with things that dwell in the shadows, the dark will always be a part of us.

Forever. . .

And, by God, we wouldn't have it any other way.

### ***FOOTNOTES***

1. Although this usually consists of more "mainstream" fare like *Deep Blue Sea*, *Lake Placid*, and *Scream An Urban Legend If You Know What Chucky Did Last Valentine's Day*.
2. Surprise! It's not. Though a lot of horror fans have enjoyed it, I call *Midnight Rain* a "coming-of-age thriller".
3. In fact, despite being a fanatic of all things horror, I am a Christian, believe it or not. Albeit a fairly liberal one.
4. For a wonderful, scholarly analysis of such matters, you could do a lot worse than Chris Treagus's *Primevil Fear*. Get it today. [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) carries it.
5. Perhaps the most frightening thing of all? You decide. . .
6. Three perfect examples, and I rest my case: Dr. F. Paul Wilson (*The Keep, All the Rage*), Douglas Winter (*Run, Prime Evil*), and David Whitman (*Scary Rednecks, Deadfellas*). A doctor, a lawyer, and a social worker who also happen to be three of the best damn writers in this business, in my opinion. So there.
7. Although I'm probably preachin' to the choir here: In many cases, this isn't really a bad thing, now is it? Trash can be a lot o' fun. Far be it from me to denigrate the brainless "fun factor" of such lovable junk as *The Toxic Avenger*, *Night of the Demons*, and *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* (the latter being my six-year-old son's favorite movie of late—yep, the cycle does continue. . .heh, heh).
8. May those fine institutions of American cinema rest in peace. Sure do wish I was old enough to remember more about them.
9. Alongside a made-for-TV chiller called *Dark Night of the Scarecrow*,

## I Live For This Shit!

Carpenter's *The Thing* is one of the first movies I can remember giving me nightmares. I will never forget the first time I saw that spider-head-thing scrambling across the floor of McCready's arctic outpost. "You gotta be fucking kidding," one character proclaimed, and even at the age of eight or nine I wholeheartedly agreed.

10. Oddly enough, the scariest thing about *The Exorcist* for me that very first time I saw it wasn't the pea-soup-spewin', the head-spinning, or even the nonstop sacrilege (mind you, this may have been because the version I saw back then was heavily edited for the boob tube). It was those damn hospital scenes! Needles. Ugh. NOTHING Ellen Burstyn's "cunting daughter" had done could have deserved such a fate as that! Unless they're of the *tattooing* variety, let the record show that Newman doesn't *do* needles. *Huh-uh*. Nope.

11. Those *Scary Stories To Tell In the Dark* books by Alvin Schwartz were always a fave. Still are, for that matter. Props also gotta go to Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. And believe it or not, back then I always found Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* to be a tad "creepy" too. What the hell caused that damn breakfast entree to be *green* in the first place? That's what I wanna know. Trioxin-245? And why was that little dude so persistent about homeboy givin' them a try?! (Okay, I admit I am stretchin' the horror element big-time here).

And now, last but not least . . . if anyone cares to know . . .

### **MY TOP 13 FAVORITE MOVIES:**

- 1) John Carpenter's *The Thing*
- 2) *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974)
- 3) *The Exorcist*
- 4) *The Exorcist III: Legion*
- 5) *Return of the Living Dead*
- 6) *Se7en*
- 7) *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978)
- 8) *The Evil Dead*
- 9) *Night of the Living Dead* (both versions)
- 10) *Rosemary's Baby*
- 11) *Audition*
- 12) *Requiem For a Dream*
- 13) *Re-Animator*

### **MY TOP 13 FAVORITE NOVELS:**

## James Newman

- 1) *Boy's Life*, by Robert R. McCammon
- 2) *Cage of Night*, by Ed Gorman
- 3) *Christine*, by Stephen King
- 4) *The Girl Next Door*, by Jack Ketchum
- 5) *Lightning*, by Dean R. Koontz
- 6) *University*, by Bentley Little
- 7) *The House Next Door*, by Anne Rivers-Siddons
- 8) *The Children's Hour*, by Douglas Clegg
- 9) *Cujo*, by Stephen King
- 10) *Feast*, by Graham Masterton
- 11) *The Dead Zone*, by Stephen King
- 12) *Animals*, by John Skipp & Craig Spector
- 13) *Neverland*, by Douglas Clegg



# The Press

## Graham Masterton

**Few people shed any tears when Padraic Rossa died** at the age of 89, even his publishers, because he hadn't produced a book that was either comprehensible or commercial since the mid-1970s, and he was probably the most cantankerous man that Irish letters had ever known. Even Brendan O'Neill, who was loved by authors everywhere for his emollient reviews in the *Cork Examiner*, had called Rossa, "A foul temper on legs".

Rossa's last work *All Hallows Eve* was published in 1997 and was little more than a splenetic rant about the way in which the Irish had allowed the rest of the world to turn a sacred Celtic ritual dating back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century into a "cash cow for the makers of plastic pumpkins and

## Graham Masterton

Hallmark Cards”.

“It was one thing to turn our folk music into fiddle-de-dee for the tourist trade, and our magical beliefs into garden gnomes. But by allowing the commercialization of Halloween we have dragged the souls of our dead ancestors out of the eternal shadows and hung them up in the common light of the marketplace for every inquisitive passer-by to finger.”

When it was published two weeks before Halloween, Rossa’s book was widely excoriated in the book pages of the *Irish Times* and several other newspapers and magazines for being “a saliva-spraying welter of Celtic superstition and Druidic mumbo-jumbo, by a man who seems to believe that ‘fun’ is a notifiable disease”.

You no doubt remember, though, that five of the reviewers who gave Rossa such critical notices disappeared on the night of All Hallows’ Eve, and no trace of them was ever found. There was a lengthy investigation by the Garda Síochána, during which Rossa was questioned several times, but he made no comment about their vanishing, except to say that they had probably got what they deserved. Nervous jokes were made in the press about “the curse of Padraic Rossa” and stories were told in Henchy’s Bar that he had summoned up Satan to drag his critics down to hell, their way lit by embers in turnip lanterns.

After he died, Rossa’s huge Victorian house on the steep hill overlooking the River Lee in Montenotte came up for auction almost immediately, since there were bills to be settled and Rossa’s books hadn’t made any decent money in decades. The coal bill alone hadn’t been paid for six-and-a-half years.

I was called up by *Irish Property* to write a feature about the house and I went up there one slick wet Thursday morning with John McGrorty, who was to take the photographs. John was a very humorous fellow with a head of hair like a bunch of spring carrots and a taste for ginger tweed jackets.

We parked in Lovers’ Walk and John took a selection of pictures of the outside. The house was a four-story building in the Gothic style, painted pale green, with dark green window-frames, as tall as a cliff. I think “forbidding” would be your word for it. It stood on the brow of the hill with the river far below, and from the steep back garden you could see all of Cork City and all the way beyond to the drizzly grey-green hills.

We rang the doorbell at the glass front porch, and a young woman from the auctioneers came to answer it. A large yellowish slug was clinging halfway up the window, and John touched it with the tip of his cigarette so that it shriveled and dropped onto the flagstones.

## The Press

"You're a sadist," I told him.

The young woman from the auctioneers was pretty enough, with a short brown bob and a pale heart-shaped face and sea-green eyes and rimless glasses. "My name's Fionnula," she said, holding out her hand.

"I'm John," said John, "and this is Michael. Do you know what 'Fionnula' means in Swahili?"

Fionnula shook her head.

"It means 'bespectacled beauty from the auctioneers.'"

"Oh, yes," she said, "and do you know what 'John' means in Urdu? It means 'red-headed chancer in a clashing orange coat.'"

"Well, girl, you give as good as you get," John told her. "Are you going to be conducting us on a tour of these delightfully gloomy premises, then?"

The hallway was vast. Over a marble fireplace hung a dark oil portrait of Padraic Rossa himself, clutching his lapels as if he were trying to tear them off his jacket. He had a blocky-looking head, and he looked more like a bare-knuckle boxer than a writer.

"He was a sour-tempered man and no mistake," said Fionnula. "I met him only the once. I came up here to make a valuation but he wouldn't let me into the house. He said that he wouldn't be dealing with an empty-headed young girl who knew nothing of the Celtic tradition."

She showed us the drawing-room with its heavy velvet curtains and its strange paintings of pale men and women, peering out of the darkness with luminous eyes. Some of them had beaks like owls, while others had foxes' claws instead of hands.

"You could well believe that Rossa was a close friend of his Satanic Majesty, now couldn't you?" said John. The flashes from his camera seemed to make the people in the paintings jump, as if for a split-second he had brought them to life.

We toured the bedrooms. The ceilings were damp, and in some places the wallpaper was hanging down. In Rossa's own bedroom, the mattress on the four-poster bed had a dark stain in the middle of it, and there was an overwhelming smell of urine and death.

At last we came back downstairs to take a look at the dining room. At the far end of the room stood a huge mahogany cupboard, with carved pillars and bunches of grapes, which must have been used for storing china. In Ireland we would call a cupboard like this a press.

"That is a massive piece of joinery and no mistake," said John, taking pictures of it. Its finial touched the ceiling, and it had a wide drawer underneath with handles in the shape of demons' faces, with rings through their noses.

Fionnula turned the key in the lock and opened up the press so that

## Graham Masterton

we could look inside. It was completely empty, but it was unexpectedly large inside, almost three times as deep as it looked from the outside. It had that sour vinegary smell of old cupboards that have been closed up for years.

"You could almost live in this," said John. "In fact I think it's bigger than my flat. And look...what's that written on the back?"

The back of the press was covered in lettering, faded black, with some gilded capitals. It looked like Gaelic.

"We'll have a picture of this," said John. "Here, bespectacled beauty from the auctioneers, do you think you could hold my light for me?"

He helped Fionnula to climb up into the press, and then he climbed in after her. He handed her his electronic strobe light and started to take pictures of the lettering at the back. "Now I recognize some of the words here," he said. "*Beó duine d'éis a anma*...that means 'a man may live after his death.'"

He peered at the lettering even more closely. "This is some kind of Celtic incantation...a summoning-up of dead souls. It must be connected with Rossa's book on All Hallows' Eve."

As his fingers traced the words, however, I heard an extraordinary noise. A slow, mechanical ticking, like a very loud clock, but punctuated by the clicking of levers and tumblers, and the flat *donk* sound of expanding springs.

"What the hell's that?" asked John, turning around. But before any of us could do anything, the huge doors to the press swung silently shut, and locked themselves, trapping John and Fionnula inside.

"Will you open the effing doors, Michael?" shouted John. "This isn't a joke!"

"For God's sake, let us out!" said Fionnula. She sounded panicky already. "I can't stand enclosed spaces!"

I turned the key, but the doors wouldn't budge. I went to the sideboard and pulled open the drawers. One of them was full of tarnished cutlery, so I took out a dinner-knife and tried to pry the doors open with that. They still refused to open. Both John and Fionnula were hammering and kicking on them, but they were so solid that they didn't even shake.

It was then that I heard two more sounds. A high-pitched squeaking, like a screw turning, and then a sliding noise.

"John!" I shouted. "John, are you all right? I'm going into the garden, see if I can find a shovel or a pick or something!"

But John yelled, "The ceiling! The ceiling's coming down!"

"What?"

"The ceiling's coming down! It's going to crush us!"

The squeaking went on and on. I ran into the rainy garden and came

## The Press

back with an iron fence-post, and I beat at those doors until the fence-post almost bent double. John and Fionnula were both screaming and then I heard something break, and John crying out in agony. *“Oh Mary Mother of God save us! Oh Mary Mother of God forgive me!”*

After that there was nothing but a slow complicated crunching. I stood outside the press with my eyes filled with tears, trembling with shock. Eventually the squeaking stopped, and then I heard ratchets and cogs, and the doors to the press slowly opened themselves. Inside, there was nothing at all. No John, no Fionnula.

For a moment I couldn't understand what had happened to them. But then I saw blood dripping from the edge of the drawer at the bottom of the press. I took hold of the demon's-head handles and slowly pulled it open.

If you have never seen human beings compressed until they are less than an inch thick, it is almost impossible to describe them to you. The most horrible thing is their faces, which look like pink rubber Halloween masks, with scarlet lips, and empty, liquid eyes.

But John and Fionnula's bodies weren't the only remains in the drawer. Underneath them were the crushed remains of several other people, their skin as papery and desiccated as wasps' nests.

I could only guess how Padraic Rossa had persuaded his critics to step into his cupboard. Perhaps he had pretended to be conciliatory, and invited them up to his house to explain the mysteries of Halloween to them. Then perhaps he had suggested that they examine the Celtic incantations at close quarters. Whatever had happened, he had made sure that they, too, had a very bad press.





# Oilman

Rick Hautala

December, 1992

**"Looks to me like what you got here's a stuck intake valve."**

The man from the oil company—he had the name “Phil” stitched above the breast pocket of his Dixon Oil Company jacket—struggled as he heaved his two hundred and seventy-five-plus pounds up from the cellar floor. He brushed both hands on the knees of his grease-stained bib overalls. They looked like they used to be blue, once upon a time, but now they were black and shiny.

Standing close to her daddy, Holly Brewer watched as the oilman

grunted and hiked up his pants. The frayed shoulder straps looked like they weren't quite doing their job. Holly thought it was a good thing the bib covered as much of his bulging gut as it did because she could see that his khaki work shirt was missing a few buttons. The straining bib was the only thing that prevented his belly from hanging out like a huge water-filled balloon. He winked at her and grinned, exposing his big, yellow teeth. Holly thought his smile looked like the Big Bad Wolf's in her Little Red Riding Hood storybook.

"Won't take but a coupla of minutes to fix 'er up for yah," Phil said. His voice had a phlegmy rattle to it that Holly didn't like.

Standing off to one side, Ken Brewer—Holly's daddy—nodded as he shifted from one foot to the other. She could tell he was trying not to let her see how cold he was, but even with his jaw clenched, his teeth wouldn't stop chattering. He glanced at his wristwatch, then smiled at Holly. His left hand rested on her thin shoulder, squeezing lightly. Her thin body shivered beneath his touch, but like him, she was trying not to let it show how cold she was.

"It's about four o'clock in the morning," her daddy said to Phil. "You think you got the part with you?"

Phil made a funny, pig-like face that made him look even scarier, Holly thought. She moved a step closer to her daddy.

"If there ain't one in the truck, I know I got one back at the shop. I keep plenty of 'em on hand. Standard part, yah know."

"How long will it take?" her daddy asked.

Holly could hear the exasperation in his voice as he glanced at her again. She tried to return the smile to show just how brave she was being during this family emergency.

"Fifteen minutes each way, if I have'ta go back to the shop 'n get one," Phil said. "Maybe a little longer 'cause of the snow. No more 'n half hour to install it 'n make sure it's workin' proper." He paused and smiled at Holly again before getting down on one knee and rummaging through the chaos that was his toolbox. All the tools were smeared with oil and grease.

"Don't you worry, little lady," he said, still smiling his scary wolf smile. "We'll have you all nice 'n toasty 'fore long."

"Figures, don't it?" her daddy said. "That the furnace would crap out right in the middle of our first winter storm?"

"That's always the way," Phil replied. "Don't really depend on 'em in the summer."

In the brief silence that followed, Holly listened to the low whistle of the winter wind outside the cellar window. Pellets of snow hissed against the glass, sounding like fingernails scraping against metal. The single

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cellar light at the foot of the stairs reflected from the glass, making it look like polished black marble. Although she couldn't see how much snow there was, she hoped it was piling up fast. If it kept up like this much longer, there wouldn't be school in the morning, for sure. As far as she was concerned, the snow could pile up to the first floor windows—as long as the furnace got fixed.

"Oh, by th'way," Phil said as he wiped his hands on an oily rag, "You folks ain't missing a cat or anythin', are yah?"

Holly's daddy gave a quick shake of the head and said, "No. Why you ask?"

Phil scratched his beard-stubbed jowls, leaving a long soot streak that ran from his left ear to the corner of his mouth. "Nothin'. It's just—when I first got here, I thought I heard somethin'. Sounded sorta like scratchin' in behind the wall."

He cocked his head toward the cellar wall where a wide, gray pipe ran from the furnace into the chimney. There was a hinged metal cover on the side that kept flapping back and forth, making a faint squeaking noise with every gust of wind. After they all listened for a moment or two, Phil exhaled softly and shook his head.

"Nope. Don't hear it now."

"Maybe it was the wind fluting in the chimney," Holly's daddy offered. "Or it might've been someone moving around upstairs. I think my wife's up in the living room, trying to stay warm." He sighed. "Times like these, I sure wish we had a fireplace."

"They do come in handy, but I'll have 'er fixed up no sweat."

Without even looking at her daddy, Holly could tell that all he wanted was for the oilman to stop gabbing, get whatever part he needed, and get the furnace up and running so the house could start warming up. A wayward draught blew along the cement floor, snaking around her ankles and making her shiver.

"Well, then," Phil said, "Lemme see if I got it in the truck."

He stood up and flipped his toolbox shut with the scuffed toe of his work boot, then zipped up his oil-stained jacket, pulled the woolen hat he was wearing down to his eyebrows, and slipped his hands into his thick, leather work gloves.

"Back in a jif."

Holly's daddy nodded and stepped to one side, pulling her with him as the fat man passed by and clumped heavily up the stairs. Holly thought her daddy might ask her to go back upstairs, too. Truth was, there was no reason for her to freeze down here while the scary oilman monkeyed around with their furnace. Then again, there wasn't much point in going upstairs, either. In fact, it was probably warmer down here

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than it was upstairs. And no matter what, she didn't want to go upstairs until the furnace was fixed because there was no way she wanted to listen to her mommy complain that it was all her *daddy's* fault because *he* had wanted to save *money* this year and had *canceled* the annual furnace cleaning. She was tired of listening to them fight.

"You okay, Baby?" her daddy asked, pulling her close and scruffing her hair.

She looked up at him and smiled bravely. She knew how worried he always was about money and things, but she really was *enjoying* this little emergency. As long as the oilman knew he could fix the furnace, it was a fun adventure just being down here with him. She was about to tell him that when a sudden noise made her jump. She first thought that it was the oilman, slamming the door behind him as he went outside, but she immediately realized that the sound—a faint, scratching rasp—had come from the wall behind the furnace.

"Did you—?" she started to say, then stopped herself.

"Did I what?" her daddy asked following a brief silence.

Holly looked at her daddy and ran her teeth over her lower lip.

"Oh, nothing," she said, shaking her head and letting her gaze slide past him to the furnace. "I just—"

"Maybe you should run upstairs and see how your momma's doing," her daddy suggested. He was using that calm voice he used when he wanted her to behave, but Holly could hear an edge of nervousness behind it.

"No. I wanna stay here with you," she said, trying not to sound whiny.

Her daddy's smile widened as he pulled her close to him. Because of the cold, his hug wasn't as warm as it usually was, but she reached her arms around his waist and held on tightly. She was about to tell him how much she loved him when the dull, scraping sound was repeated, louder this time.

Holly looked at the wall behind the furnace, then up at her daddy.

"Daddy. What was that?" she asked.

A cold, tingly rush ran up her back, but she tried not to let it show. She wanted her daddy to know that she was a brave girl and that she could handle whatever was going on.

Holly wasn't sure if her daddy had heard the sound or not, but it had been clear enough to her, and she was certain that it had come from the wall behind the cold, silent furnace.

"I dunno, baby," her daddy said as his eyes twitched back and forth, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

Stacked against the wall was a large dust-covered pile of junk—

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numerous cardboard boxes, rusty tools, old books and magazines, coils of frayed rope and electrical wire, half-empty cans of paint, and an assortment of other useless stuff that her momma had said should have been carted off to the dump years ago but which had accumulated down here instead.

Her daddy took a breath and held it as he leaned forward and scanned the junk pile. Holly was thinking that something must have shifted in the pile. She was afraid it might be a mouse or maybe even a rat scrambling for cover because of all the racket down here in the cellar.

"You wanna run upstairs and get Daddy a flashlight?" her daddy asked

For a moment, Holly couldn't move. She didn't hear any trace of nervousness in his voice, but she stood there, staring at the deep shadows cast by the junk pile. The darkness looked like ink. Chunks of cement and dust covered the floor by the pile. All Holly could think was, if her daddy looked behind there, he'd probably find a rat's nest or something.

But she didn't have to be asked twice. Anxious to please her daddy, she turned and dashed upstairs. The cellar steps creaked and snapped under her feet, and halfway up the stairs she had the sudden frightening feeling that something was chasing after her. That fear propelled her even faster up the stairs until she reached the relative safety of the kitchen. In a matter of seconds she rifled through some cabinets and drawers until she found the flashlight.

"Got it!" she yelled, closing her hand on it.

"What have you got?" her mother shouted from the living room.

"Nothing," Holly replied as she raced back down the cellar stairs and over to her daddy. Smiling, she held the flashlight out to him. He scruffed her hair again and thanked her as he flicked the switch and directed the beam of light over to the junk pile.

"Hmm. I'm surprised the batteries are still good," her daddy muttered as the weak, yellow beam wavered back and forth across the junk. The oval of light rippled along the irregular surfaces, casting sharply defined shadows that shifted from left to right as her daddy moved a bit closer.

"See anything?" Holly asked. Her voice was edged with anticipation, and she moved forward in step with her daddy just to stay close to him. As nervous as she was, she wanted to be brave, and she knew she was safe as long as her daddy was around.

Holding the flashlight in his right hand—*his swinging hand*, she thought, *like maybe he thinks he might see something and have to whack it!*—her daddy stepped up close to the pile.

"Here," he said, holding the flashlight out to her. "Hold this for me,

will you?"

Holly took the light and tried to keep it steady as her daddy started removing a few boxes from the top of the pile, placing them to one side. The pile was taller than Holly, and it looked like it might fall over on her, but her daddy moved everything slowly and carefully so nothing would fall. Clouds of dust swirled up into the air, and a dry, stinging sensation reached deep into her nose and throat, almost gagging her.

Holly stayed close behind her daddy, the fingers of one hand hooked protectively through his belt-loop. The dust bothered her, but she wriggled her nose back and forth, trying hard not to sneeze.

Her daddy had moved five or six boxes when they heard the upstairs door open and then slam shut. Craning her head around, Holly watched the cellar stairs as a large shadow loomed in the doorway. She didn't feel much relief when she recognized the scary oilman's round, bulky silhouette.

The stairs snapped and creaked loudly as the oilman started down, all the while whistling a nearly tuneless song. Holly's eyes widened as she watched him approach.

"Yup. Had one in the truck after all."

Phil sniffed as he raised his hand to show the small cardboard box he was carrying. He skinned his snow-flecked woolen hat off and used it to wipe the moisture from his forehead. "Took a bit of lookin' 'round, but still, s'quicker 'n if I had to drive all the way back to the shop."

"Uh-huh," her daddy said. He seemed suddenly embarrassed to be pawing through the junk pile and stepped back. Holly aimed the flashlight beam down at the cement floor.

"It was snowing like a bastard," Phil said, "but now it seems to be lettin' up a bit. Flakes are getting bigger." He knelt beside his toolbox and sorted through the tools until he found what he was looking for and then, with a screwdriver and a small wrench in hand, set to work.

Still hanging onto her daddy's belt-loop, Holly did her best to keep her daddy between her and the oilman, but she was curious and wanted to see what he was doing. She watched in silence as the oilman worked, muttering curses under his breath whenever a screw or bolt was particularly unyielding. All the while, though, Holly kept shifting her gaze to the pile of rubbish by the wall. She wasn't sure, but once or twice she thought she heard faint scratching sounds masked by the clanging and banging sounds the oilman was making. She was tempted to snap on the flashlight to see if she could catch any hint of motion in the shadows but decided not to if only because she didn't want her daddy to know how nervous she was. If he did, he would send her upstairs for sure.

After ten or fifteen minutes, Phil let out a loud satisfied sigh.

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“Here ‘tis,” he said, holding up what Holly guessed was the intake valve for her daddy to see. “This here’s your culprit.”

He studied it from several angles before casually tossing it on top of the tools in his toolbox. Then he shook the new intake valve out of the box and, still whistling, set to work replacing it.

Holly watched all of this with interest. She had no idea—and could care less—what the man was doing, just as long as the furnace started running before dawn, and she and her daddy could go back upstairs. Her daddy had said something about wanting to make sure the water pipes didn’t freeze, and Holly could just imagine the argument he and her momma would have if *that* ever happened.

“Christ on a cross, it’s getting cold” her daddy whispered as he shivered and hugged himself and bounced on his toes.

“Daddy. You shouldn’t swear,” Holly said, tugging at his arm. She had heard worse—much worse when her momma and daddy argued, and she didn’t like it even when her friends at school swore to try to impress each other.

Looking surprised that he had spoken aloud, her daddy glanced at her and then, scooching down, turned her around so she was facing him. His smile widened, looking for real, now, as he pulled her close and gave her a big hug. Holly hugged him back, feeling the warmth of his breath against her neck, but suddenly her body stiffened. An instant later, a deep trembling ran through her. Her daddy drew back and looked her in the eyes.

“Baby...? What is it?” he asked.

Holly knew her face must be as white as paper. Her eyes were wide and staring, and her mouth hung open. She was trying to say something but couldn’t get the words out. Her thin lips barely moved.

“Holly?” her daddy said, his voice rising with concern.

Very slowly, Holly raised her hand and pointed to something behind him. As her daddy turned to look, a cold prickling sensation ran up the back of Holly’s neck. Her hand holding the flashlight involuntarily squeezed the metal cylinder so hard her forearm started to ache. She whimpered. Or maybe it was her daddy making that noise. She wasn’t sure.

“I...There’s something...under that stuff,” she whispered, surprised that she could speak at all.

She wanted so much to be brave. She knew that’s what her daddy expected of her, but the shifting of a shadow, darker than the shadows cast by the junk, held her attention. She couldn’t swallow. Her breath burned in her throat when, for just an instant, she saw large, glowing eyes staring back at her from under the pile of boxes.

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“Daddy,” she said, her voice rising higher but still no more than a ragged whisper.

But her daddy didn’t turn to look at her. He straightened up and, taking the flashlight from her, moved slowly forward with the beam of light aimed directly at the spot where she had seen...whatever she had seen. The glow of the flashlight seemed too dim, much too weak to pierce the dense shadows. The only sounds in the cellar were the clanging and grunting noises Phil was making as he worked, unaware that anything was happening and the distant hiss of snow against the cellar window.

“I saw...” Holly said, but her daddy waved her to silence as he inching forward.

“Yeah, I saw it too,” he said.

Holly was hoping he’d tell her it had been nothing more than a mouse or a rat, but if the eyes she had seen were any indication, it would have to be the biggest rat in the world. She moved with her daddy closer to the pile of junk, not wanting to lose touch with him even though it meant getting closer to whatever it was she had seen. An icy tightening weaved through her chest, and a voice inside her head told her to run—to get upstairs as fast as she could; but she told herself that everything would be all right. She was safe. As long as she stayed with her daddy, nothing was going to hurt her.

Bending down so he could see better, her daddy shined the light into the gap between two of crushed boxes. Moving slowly, he skidded one of the boxes to the side. It made a loud grating noise on the cement floor that set Holly’s teeth on edge. She realized that she was holding her breath and let it out slowly as her daddy, on his hands and knees, shined the light into the deep gap.

“What the hell could’ve done this,” he said.

Holly knew that he was talking to himself; he never would have sworn, talking to her.

“Daddy?”

He leaned forward and was starting to shift the stack of boxes to the side when the pile erupted with a sudden explosion of activity. Holly screamed and staggered backwards as a mass of black, tangled shapes poured out from underneath the boxes. For an instant, the flashlight beam shined fully into the face of one of the ...things. The cellar filled with its shrill cry as it raised its clawed hands to cover its face and cowered from the light

But the instant passed, and the creatures surged outward toward her daddy. Holly didn’t see anything clearly. It was just a pile of writhing arms with claws, needle sharp teeth, and faces...small, dark, almost

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human-looking faces with huge, bulging eyes that glowed dull green in the dim light of the cellar. The squealing sounds they made reminded her of how her dog, Heidi, had sounded before she died the day she was hit by a passing car.

Gripped with terror, Holly was still screaming when the oilman wheeled around, reacting to the sudden noise and her screams. The gap in the pile of junk shifted and widened as more and more of these...*things*—they certainly weren't mice or rats—spilled out into the cellar. The high-pitched sounds they made hurt her ears.

Her daddy swung the flashlight once...twice. On the second swing, he connected with something, and the lens of the flashlight shattered as one of the creatures yipped with pain. Then all Holly could hear was a wet ripping sound as her daddy spun around on one foot, his legs buckling and his hands covering his face. Numb with shock, she watched as blood gushed between her daddy's hands where his face used to be. In the dim light, the blood was as black as the oil smudge on the oilman's face. The creatures—more than she could count—tore at her daddy, their claws raking across his back and his legs, shredding his clothes and ripping him apart. He spun around and staggered and tried to shout something to her, but his words were lost in a horrible, liquid gurgle as the claws laid his throat open.

"What in the name of Christ?" the oilman shouted.

He stumbled forward, blundering between Holly and the writhing mass of shrieking creatures that continued to boil out of the hole in the wall. They looked like twisting, scaly worms, spilling from an overturned bait can. As the gap in the junk pile widened, Holly caught a glimpse of a large hole in the cellar wall—a tunnel that was lost in darkness and obscured by the onrush of creatures.

*"Go on! Run! Get the Christ out of here!"* the oilman yelled, and he pushed Holly away just before the gibbering mass of creatures overwhelmed him.

The cellar was filled with the raw, wet tearing sounds of shredded flesh as they piled onto him. Gouts of blood and gore flew through the air, splashing the walls and ceiling.

Holly knew that she should run. The voice inside her head was screaming at her to get away, but she was frozen in place, unable to understand anything she was seeing.

Her daddy was gone.

She couldn't believe it.

Just seconds ago, he had been standing there, and then he just...disappeared, smothered by the savage onslaught of these snarling creatures.

Finally, when Holly saw the oilman collapse beneath the weight of the creatures piling on top of him, she found the strength and will to start for the stairs. They looked impossibly far away. The single light at the foot of the stairs cast a dull glow over the wood, making the steps look like something from a dream. Before she was halfway there, a dark shadow filled the doorway at the top of the stairs.

“What in the *hell* is going on down here?” her momma shouted as she started down the stairs.

Raising her hand and pointing toward the furnace, Holly tried to say something—anything, but her mind was a blinding white sheet of terror, and the only sound she could manage was a faint blubbering that made absolutely no sense.

Her mother stopped at the foot of the stairs. Her eyes widened with terror, and her face went white when she saw Holly.

“Honey...?” she said. “Are you?...Did *he* do *this* to you?”

Holly had no idea what she was talking about until her momma ran her hand over her face and Holly saw the smeared blood on her fingers. She stuttered, gasping for breath, trying to tell her mother what she had seen, but none of it made any sense. It was impossible that her daddy and that big, fat oilman could have been covered by those...those *things*.

Her momma was trembling visibly as she moved closer. She paused for a moment, then her gaze drifted past Holly as the sounds the creatures were making rose louder.

“What in the name of God—”

Holly pushed past her momma and started up the stairs. Her legs felt weak, like they weren’t nearly strong enough to carry her all the way up the flight of stairs.

“*Run, Momma...Run!*” she wailed, but her momma didn’t run. She was frozen, staring at the dark forms that gathered in the shadows of the stairwell.

“*It’s the light!*” Holly shouted, feeling as though her voice was being ripped out of her. “*They’re afraid of the light! Come on, Momma! We have to—*”

“Where’s your daddy?” her momma shrieked.

Holly knew that she had to do what her daddy would expect her to do.

She had to be brave.

“*We have to get away, Momma!*” Holly shouted. She had stopped halfway up the stairs and wasn’t sure she had the strength to go the rest of the way up into the kitchen. But she knew she had to. She had to shut the door and lock it, but she couldn’t leave her momma behind.

“Just what the hell is going on down here?” her momma said as she

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took several quick steps backwards. She shaded her eyes from the overhead light and was about to turn to leave when she tripped and fell—or was pulled—backwards, hitting the floor hard.

“No!” Holly yelled when something flew out of the darkness and, with a loud *pop*, the light bulb at the foot of the stairs shattered. The thing that had broken the light bounced off the ceiling and landed on the first step. Holly saw that it was a boot—the oilman’s greasy, scuffed work boot. There was some tangled red stuff hanging out of the top, and a shattered bone was sticking up out of it.

Dizzy with fear, Holly raced up the stairs and collapsed onto the kitchen floor. Tears streamed down her face, and she cringed when she heard a sudden rise in the gibbering sounds the creatures were making. Any second now, Holly expected to feel razor-sharp claws slice into her back, but—somehow—she found the strength to get up, turn, and look back down into the cellar. The creatures were swarming on top of her mother, their angry snarls filling the air as their claws and fangs flashed in the darkness. Her mother’s screams rose to a shrill note and then trailed away with a gargling sound only to be replaced by the sounds of tearing flesh and cracking bones.

Slowly, her body shaking terribly, Holly staggered to her feet. Burning gasps wracked her thin chest with every breath she took. A horrible taste filled the back of her throat, making her gag. Her hands shook uncontrollably as she grasped the doorknob, preparing to slam the door shut. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew that the thin door wasn’t anywhere near strong enough to stop these things, whatever they were. Their claws could rip through the wood as easily as they tore through flesh, she knew, and she—*just like her daddy and the oilman and her momma*—was going to be killed...ripped to pieces.

Numb with shock and terror, Holly looked around, her mind going totally blank as she tried to think of what to do next. She couldn’t run outside. All she had on was her slippers, pajamas, and an old flannel bathrobe. Besides, there were several inches, maybe a foot of snow on the ground. She wouldn’t get far. The nearest neighbors—Mr. and Mrs. Holland—lived more than a quarter mile away. There was no one who could save her.

But Holly was convinced that, if she went upstairs and tried to hide, the creatures would find her. She knew where her daddy kept his hunting rifle, but she had no idea where he hid the bullets. Even if the gun was loaded, she didn’t know how to shoot and, besides, there were way too many of these things. She couldn’t stop them all.

Tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision as she looked around the kitchen. The creatures were moving around down in the darkness of the

cellar. When she glanced down the stairway, she saw numerous pairs of dully glowing eyes staring up at her. Glancing over her shoulder at the kitchen window, Holly was surprised to notice that the snow had stopped. Above the trees across the road, the sky was brightening, turning from black to a dark, sooty gray as the dawn approached.

*They're afraid of the light*, she thought, remembering how one of the creatures had squealed when her daddy had shined the flashlight in its face.

*Would the daylight be bright enough?* she wondered.

*Was there enough light to keep these horrible things down in the cellar?*

She wasn't aware of the whimpering sounds she made as she slammed the door shut and leaned her back against it. Clinging with both hands to the doorknob, she pressed hard against the door. From down in the cellar, she heard the stairs creak as the creatures started up after her. Their claws scraped against the wood, and the soft grunting and clicking sounds the creatures made chilled her blood.

And then the first body slammed against the door. The impact was hard enough to jolt Holly, but she gritted her teeth and held on, pressing her back flat against the door.

*Will it hold?* she wondered.

She remembered her daddy saying one time that one of the things he liked about this house when they bought it was that the doors were made of good, solid, old-fashioned oak, not the cheap kind you find in most houses.

*Is this door oak?*

Would it be strong enough to hold until daylight came, and the creatures would be afraid and have to return to the darkness?

Holly's tears burned her eyes as she stared out the kitchen window at the gradually brightening sky. The storm clouds were blowing away fast, now that the storm was over, and the dark gray of dawn was steadily lightening. Her heart hammered in her chest, making her neck throb. The door, no more than an inch thick, was all that separated her from the creatures with their horrible, ugly faces and their terrible claws. From the other side, she could hear the steady rasping sound as they scaped and tore into the wood.

*Will it hold?*

Pressure was building up on the other side. She could feel it as more and more creatures came up the stairs and pressed their weight against the door, clawing at the wood. Every now and then the doorknob jiggled in her hand, but they didn't try to force it. Holly guessed they were just dumb animals, too stupid to know how to use it. Kicking off her slippers

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so she could get better traction on the cold linoleum floor, she braced her shaking legs and leaned ever harder against the door as the frantic scratching sounds and the squealing from the other side got steadily louder.

*Will it hold?...*

*Will it hold?*

That thought kept pounding in her head like the steady hammering that came from the other side of the thin oak door. If she could hang on long enough, if she could just keep them down in the cellar until dawn, Holly knew she might have a chance.

She might not die.

But how soon would the sun come up now that the snowstorm had blown away, and how strong was the door?

Would it hold them back long enough so, as morning light filled the cellar, they would be forced back into their hole? Or had the snow piled up high enough so it would block out the daylight, and they would continue to beat and tear at the door until it finally gave way, and they poured into the kitchen? By then, would there be enough daylight to scare them back down into the cellar, or would they do to her what they had done to her daddy and her momma and the oilman?

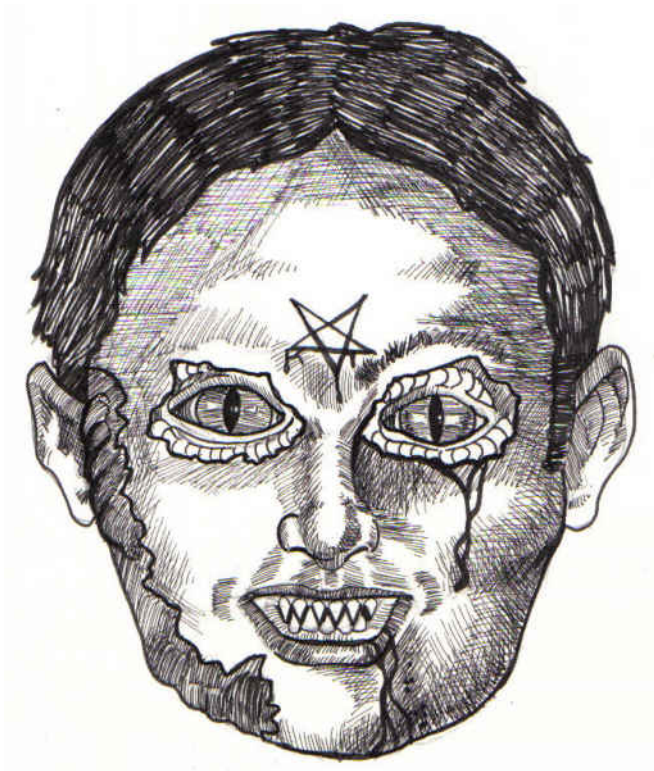
Holly choked back her tears and squeezed her eyes shut so tightly they hurt as she leaned her full weight against the cellar door.

She *had* to hold on.

She had to be *strong* and keep these things from getting her.

And no matter what, she had to be *brave* so her daddy would be *proud* of her.





# Carried on the Wind

William D. Gagliani

**Charlie realized that he loved trick or treating** when the sunny day was turning to dusk.

On the cusp of turning to dark, Charlie's father might have said. Oh, the warm winds that swept in from the mountains made the afternoon one of those glorious ones, and that was something Charlie's mother might have said (glorious, you know), but there truly *was* something

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glorious about the late October warmth turning ever so slowly into the cool October night.

The leaves rustled, giving Halloween its best sound effect, and crunched underfoot. There was no better sound, and no better smell, than that of the brown leaves making room for the new ones to follow.

He swept down the sidewalk with his old-fashioned bag, the one Charlie's mother had made for him all those years ago, and planned his route carefully. It was still early, yes it was, but there was no reason not to plan. A plan always made things more fun. He had already mapped out the first half of his route, but he would leave the second half to chance. Yes, a little blind luck on Halloween sure made trick or treating more fun, and not knowing where he'd end up, that was most fun of all.

Well, he knew where he'd end up. Just not exactly when.

He swept down the slightly familiar sidewalk and reveled in the decorated houses, the cobwebby porches and the straw-filled pretend-corpses that straddled railings or rocked gently in breeze-powered rocking chairs. He reveled in the joy and beauty of the imagery, the witches' hats and the cats with arched backs, and he couldn't help but revel in the smell of fireplaces beginning to hover over the neighborhood, as people set about warding off the night's coming chill.

His name was Charlie and he loved the cusp, the almost warmth and almost cold carried on the wind, the in-between, the spaces between the slots, and he couldn't wait to fill his bag with the sweet fruits of childhood on a Halloween evening.

Friendless, he ran down the sidewalk alone but somehow not lonely, knowing that soon he would be joined by ghosts and goblins and Spider-Men and Batmen, and maybe a princess or two. But he was a loner, he knew they said that of him, and he was all right without a group of friends to call his own. He had always been alone and content, and Halloween reminded him only briefly that he ran alone.

He always celebrated the holiday his way.

He caught up to a group of ghosts and vampires and tagged along as they hit a few houses on the block, the ones with their porch lights on. He really wanted to visit the houses with the lights off and stare inside their windows, watching their occupants hide from the costumed children. The antisocial ones, those who couldn't even give out candy, made him angry.

Oh, yes, very angry. He could feel it burning inside.

But he kept to the rules, loose though they were, and just ignored the dark houses, even though he sensed their eyes following him and his new friends.

Soon enough Charlie was farther away from the home he called his

## Carried on the Wind

than he had ever been, or maybe it just seemed that way. His memories were fluid, slipping away and returning like a fuzzy television picture. He had switched groups somewhere, and now he was tagging along with two zombies, a ghost, a Superman, a lame Gilligan, and three little girls dressed as witches.

The lead zombie stopped and faced the others, rattling the meager take in his candy bag. "This block is a gyp! Let's go up the Hill."

"Uh, my mom doesn't want me to leave the neighborhood," one of the princesses said in a tiny voice.

"Then don't!" the ghost bellowed.

The Hill was the new subdivision three blocks away. Everybody knew rich people lived there. Charlie was just learning about it.

"We're going! You go home if you want to."

"I don't wanna go home," the girl cried.

"Then let's go," the lead zombie said. He looked at the others in his gang and they nodded.

"Hey, you, new kid." He pointed at Charlie, who hung in the background. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Trick or treating."

The zombie stuck a finger in Charlie's face. "Don't be a smart-ass! I don't know you. Anybody know this kid?"

The others shook their heads and muttered.

"I seen him at school, always sittin' alone," the lame Gilligan offered.

"Me too!" The ghost nodded under his sheet.

"Yeah?" the zombie said. "What's your name, kid?"

"Charlie."

"That's a pansy name. You gotta give each of us a piece of candy to join the gang." His green face scrunched up in a smirk. "And it better be the good stuff. None of that candy corn shit!"

"Yeah, Randy, that's tellin'im!" said the Superman.

"Two pieces of candy! It's gotta be two." The lead zombie held up two fingers. "Or we get to bash you."

"Look, he's cryin'," said the other zombie, clearly inferior in costume quality, pointing.

Charlie *was* crying. And it surprised him.

He wiped his face with a sleeve and felt the wetness.

Damn it, that was no good. Nothing like being a wussy. It had to be the kid's memories, kicking in. Maybe being alone wasn't something the kid really liked.

The warm-cool wind caressed Charlie's face like a soft hand. The leaves crackled in a swirl near the curb, and a snatch of Theremin-flavored sci-fi horror movie music played from one of the houses nearby,

## William Gagliani

somebody having some fun. Somebody who didn't want to ruin Halloween for Charlie.

Almost before he knew what had happened, Charlie's fist shot out and caught the lead zombie square in the nose. The crunch was loud and blood and snot squirted out over the sidewalk.

All the fight left the zombie and he ran off, howling. His gang trailed raggedly after him, lost without their head.

Charlie thought the kid's costume was much scarier now.

He sighed.

This happened every year. He just didn't learn. He liked being alone, but sometimes it was great to join a gang, even for just a short time. But they always hated being joined. He'd have to start his own gang, someday.

Charlie shrugged and searched his memory. It was time for Charlie to go home. Halloween ended early some years, and that was all right. He could still gather some treats at home, from his parents.

He retraced his steps, deliberately avoiding other groups of trick or treaters. The zombie had soured his whole night.

It was past dusk now, and the wind carried a chill with it that made him tremble just enough. He loved that feeling. Warmth turning to cold. Light turning to dark.

Love turning to hate.

He found himself in front of the house. His house.

Inside, his parents were bickering again. He ignored them as he went past, past the television and its psychedelic variety show. If they were surprised at his quick return, they didn't show it. No, Charlie didn't do well with other kids, and maybe that was what they were bickering about.

Love turning to hate.

When he came out of the kitchen, he wasn't carrying his candy bag.

First he used the butcher knife on dad, stabbing him twice in the chest and then slicing across his throat just to mess things up a bit.

Mom screamed.

Oh, how she screamed!

But it was Halloween, and people up and down the street were watching Halloween specials, so nobody paid attention to a little screaming.

He stabbed her in the belly, in the chest, and then after she went down, he stopped her thrashing with a foot and stabbed her in the eyes. He enjoyed that part tremendously, especially the last-ditch plea he saw in those green eyes before he brought the blade down again and again. It was messy, but it was what he'd been planning all evening.

## Carried on the Wind

Plans are always more fun.

It was just a little earlier than he had figured.

Charlie liked the last impression he'd left. How could our Charlie do this to us? How could he? Our Charlie...

He chuckled.

For "Charlie" was his costume, you see. Maybe next year he would trick or treat as someone else. It was part of the fun, wearing a costume and mask, and he was already planning. Although, as he watched mom and dad bleeding all over the carpeting, he had to admit he kind of liked Charlie's memories. All the bickering his parents did, and how they belittled their loner son. He enjoyed those memories more than he thought he would. They tasted pleasantly bitter.

But he was bored with the whole kid thing. The zombie bully really bugged him. Maybe it was time to explore other highways. Maybe it was time to let go of trick or treating and seek out more... adult pursuits.

He stripped off the ragged Charlie skin mask and tossed it on the floor. Time to go, sure enough, but maybe he would keep the name a while longer. Some of the memories, too.

Charlie.

It fit him.

The thing that both was and wasn't Charlie ambled out the door and into the cool October air. He wished it could be Halloween every day. He sniffed the air, inhaling the scent of woodsmoke and chilled hearts. Looking around, choosing his route, he saw the neighbors' tilted mailbox. The name was printed in bold letters: Manson. That was a nice name, too.

Charlie Manson, he thought as he walked past the mailbox and down the October sidewalk. Had a nice ring to it.

Yes it did.

Already he was planning.

Love turning to hate.

He left, his love of Halloween carried on the wind.





# Cody's Pumpkin

James A. Moore

**Just at the edge of Beldam Woods proper**, in that place between the actual town and the woods for which it was named, there was a large field. Every year since she'd been ten, Allison saw the signs that advertised for the pumpkins that grew there. She had avoided the place with an almost religious zeal for as long as it had been around. This year was different. She parked her SUV at the edge of the place, in the dirty area set aside for parking, and made herself accept that the past was just something she had to deal with.

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Allison walked her children under the sign that said THE PUNKIN PATCH and then into the pumpkin patch proper, and shivered a bit. The entire world seemed, for just that moment, to have become one of a thousand shades of orange: the leaves on the trees and the gourds themselves seemed to compete for the most perfect orange color. Even after twenty odd years, she could remember the incident like it had happened the night before.

Cody had his hand wrapped into hers and looked at her with his bright blue eyes, a puzzled frown on his pudgy face.

"Is something wrong?" For a four-year-old, he was very perceptive.

"No, honey. I just got a little chill." She made herself smile. Off in the distance, beyond the field of pumpkins, she could see the age ruined remains of the old man's house. It had changed for the worse in the last two decades. "Let's find you the right pumpkin, okay?"

Cody nodded and smiled and his older sister Wendy beamed brightly, revealing a few gaps where new teeth had yet to grow in. If she kept dropping baby teeth at the current rate, she could make a house payment for the family with what the tooth fairy was going to shell out.

And in that moment she made herself forget the past and focused instead on her children. This was for them, and all the distant fears from her childhood could go screw themselves.

The man who was in charge of the pumpkin stand looked as ancient as any she had ever seen, and though he was old and withered, he still seemed to have a certain air about him. He scared her. Not a lot, but enough for her to notice. He reminded her of someone from the past, and she couldn't quite put her finger on it

*Mister Harper*

but she'd have sworn she knew him from somewhere.

*It's just the place, she told herself. The place, and the things that happened here.* She almost made herself believe it, too.

Cody and Wendy broke away from her a few seconds later, each looking for the perfect gourd to make into a jack-o-lantern. She watched them move through the hundreds of pumpkins sitting in the small lot, and tried to force the chill from her body. It wasn't even cold enough to wear a light sweater, but she felt like an arctic blast was breathing down her neck.

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Ally stared at the old man's house and felt a knot of ice twitch in her stomach. She knew he was in there, because the sound of his TV blaring escaped past the closed windows and filled the air with whispers and

## Cody's Pumpkin

canned laughter.

The front porch light was off, and no signs of a decoration could be found at the residence. Every other house in the neighborhood was decorated with jack-o-lanterns and, in a few cases, there were monsters in the front yard, but once you got to the place where they were hiding all of that went away. The same was true of Christmas and every other holiday throughout the year. The old man had long since made clear to the people around him that he wanted nothing to do with them. That was one of the reasons they'd decided to mess with him. In all the years they'd been trick or treating together, they'd never once dared approach his place.

Mister Harper was known for his pumpkin patch, which at this time of year was empty of everything but the lingering vines and their dying leaves. He grew the best pumpkins in the Beldam Woods Township, but he did so only as a way of making money. He had no love of the season or of children. If anything, he was known for his mistrust of the kids in the neighborhood.

"I don't wanna do this." She meant the words only for herself, but comments like that one always seemed to catch Bobby's attention as easily as waving a flag irritated a bull.

"You ain't gonna chicken out, are you?" It was as much a taunting challenge as a question. Bobby Fulver was one of her best friends, but sometimes he was a pain in her neck.

"I didn't say I was chickening out, I said I didn't want to do it." Her voice came out harsher than she meant it to, but Bobby just smiled and nodded his head, encouraged by her attitude.

It was all Bobby's idea, and she hated him right then. Old Man Harper was known throughout the neighborhood as a sort of bogeyman, and Bobby wanted to prove that he wasn't afraid of him. So, of course, he dragged her along for the ride.

She'd only seen the man three times in her life that she could recall and on every occasion he wore a scowl on his narrow face, and glared pure venom from his dark eyes. He was creepy and he was mean and the notion of getting his attention did not sit well with her.

Bobby had lived next door for years, and they were friends. The fact that their parents were also friends only compounded their closeness. Hell, last year both families had even gone on vacation together to Disney World. Half the time their friendship felt more like what she supposed having a brother would feel like if she wasn't an only child.

Now she was starting to regret that closeness, because she had a bad feeling about what was going to happen in about five minutes.

"Are you sure about this?"

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Bobby shook his head and looked at her with disgust clearly scrawled over his features. "I knew you'd chicken out."

"I'm not chickening out, but he's old. What if he has a heart attack or something?"

"Then we call 9-1-1, from a payphone."

Ally nodded her head and thought about the old man. There were rumors about him all of the time. Ever since she'd become aware of his existence, the stories told about him got wilder and stranger. When she was in the first grade the stories involved him killing all the dogs that went through his yard. Later someone said he liked stealing kids from the street if they were out after dark—according to the rumors, the police were keeping an eye on him but couldn't prove anything. The worst of the rumors claimed that he did things to little kids and then hid their bodies somewhere else, like in the Beldam Woods not far from town.

She didn't believe them, of course, but the stories were there and they played on her mind late at night. Just like they were playing now, as she and Bobby crouched at the side of the old man's front yard and prepared to prove their bravery.

Ally sighed once more, and Bobby looked at the door of the ranch house where the old man lived.

"You ready?" Bobby's voice was tense with excitement.

Ally nodded and the two of them stood up. Bobby slipped his Halloween mask down over his face and Ally did the same. Anything to hide her identity, because the last thing she wanted was to get caught by the old man.

Bobby took the lead, and that was just fine with her. It was his stupid idea anyway. He ran up the three steps to the front porch and then leaned on the doorbell for several seconds. Even with the wolf man mask over his face, she could almost see the grin he'd be wearing.

She stopped moving, and reached for the bag Bobby had given her earlier. It held three water balloons, harmless, but fun. The idea was that as soon as the old man opened the door, she would start throwing. Bobby expected her to hit Mister Harper, but she already knew she'd never go through with it. She'd aim at the door, or the wall near his face, but she couldn't bring herself to hit him. He was just an old man, and no number of rumors would make her decide to do anything but startle him.

From ten feet away from the door, she heard the sound of the old man cursing, his words bellowed at a much higher volume than the television set was managing on its own.

At first the words were unintelligible, but as he came closer, she could make out what he was saying. "...every goddamned year some little shit has to come over here and cause me trouble! Well, I've already

## Cody's Pumpkin

called the police!”

The door opened abruptly, and Mister Harper glared out at the two of them, Bobby in his white ghostly outfit with the grinning skull mask, and Ally in her grease monkey clothes and bad William Shatner mask.

“You get off of my property!” The man’s voice was filled with hatred; his eyes seemed to blaze from the shadows of his prominent brow. “I don’t like Halloween and I don’t have any candy for you!”

Ally didn’t even think about it. Her hand just sort of lifted all by itself and the first of her water balloons went sailing directly for the old man’s angry face.

If she could have stopped it, she would have. She'd have gladly taken the balloon across her own face or even hit Bobby with it instead.

The shot was perfect, and the missile smashed itself against the old man’s long nose before breaking open and spewing water all over his features and down across his dingy white t-shirt.

Just as there had always been stories of the old man’s anger, there had also been tales woven of at least one to two incidents a year that were designed, it seemed, to increase his dislike of his neighbors. Barry Winslow had supposedly egged the man’s house a few years ago. She knew it was true, because her older brother Steve told her so, and Steve never lied. She also knew it was true because the eggs had dried to the paint in the night and she’d seen the bare wood where he’d scraped the stuff off before having to apply a fresh coat. There had been stories about bags of burning dog crap and other things that had been done. All of which had lead her to the decision to deliberately miss the man before her traitorous hand made up her mind for her.

Her hand should have listened to her brain.

The old man staggered back as if he’d been hit by a rock instead of a pint of water, and his entire body shook with suppressed rage. He disappeared from the doorway and Bobby looked her way, his whole frame shaking with silent laughter.

Ally shook her head, wanting so desperately to tell Bobby to run, to get the hell off of the old man’s porch before he came back. That ice that had been in her stomach seemed to spread through the rest of her body, leaving her frozen where she stood. Her bad feeling was back and it was screaming now, not just giving off little warning buzzes.

Bobby finally let out a whooping sound and gasped in a breath of air, almost doubled over by his laughter. Ally shook her head and tried to speak, but her tongue seemed to have grown too thick for her mouth.

Old man Harper walked back out of the front door of his house and pointed the pistol at her. “Get away from my house!” His voice was a roar that seemed to shake the very ground beneath her feet, and Ally

## James A. Moore

finally felt her paralysis break. She held her hands out to ward off the bullets she knew must be coming her way any second, and let out a moan instead of the pleas she'd wanted to utter.

The gun waved in the air, bobbing up and down and Ally tracked it with her eyes, swallowing hard and practically mesmerized by the way the barrel lifted and fell.

Bobby wasn't laughing anymore. He wasn't making any sound at all as he watched the gun's actions.

The old man pointed the pistol at her face, his mouth moving, saying words to her, but she couldn't hear them over the ringing in her ears and the sound of her own pulse. Ally shook her head and trembled.

And Bobby, who was as much a brother to her as if he had been her own flesh, who had suffered through several crushes on her and endured the same in return, reached out his hands and grabbed at the old man's pistol.

"Run, Ally!" His words were all she needed to get moving.

Ally ran as hard as she could, turning her back on Bobby and Mister Harper. She'd gone only ten or so paces before the pistol fired three times.

She didn't look back. She was far too busy running.

Ally never saw Bobby alive again.

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Cody's hand tugging on her shirttail drew Allison back to the present. She did her best to shake off the memories that she'd tried to suppress for as long as she could remember. Her success was minimal.

They'd never found Bobby's body. No one ever learned the truth about what had happened and no one ever believed her about the old man. She'd admitted to throwing the water balloon and everything, but Mister Harper had merely shrugged and denied the whole thing. He'd even let the police look through his house, and they claimed to have found no evidence of any wrongdoing. As far as they could tell, the old man didn't even own a gun. Even the noises were described away by other neighbors, who said that they'd heard popping sounds, like fireworks. There was evidence of a few firecrackers going off in a neighbor's yard, and that was all the explanation the police seemed to need.

But it didn't leave the old man comfortable. He'd claimed he wanted to be left alone and, after Bobby vanished, that was the last thing he got, if the rumors were true. Almost daily someone was knocking on his door or making phone calls and threatening him. He moved away less than

## Cody's Pumpkin

three months later.

After that, she had no idea what had happened to him. All she knew was that Bobby had disappeared that night, and Harper had been the one to take him.

She'd relived that Halloween a million times in her head, wishing that she'd never thrown the damned balloon, wishing that she'd talked Bobby out of the whole thing in the first place, and wishing even harder that someone would have made the old bastard pay for whatever he did to Bobby.

"Mom! I found the right one! It's perfect!" Four, and the kid talked like he was in his teens half the time. She figured he must have gotten his smarts from his father's side of the family, because Dan was the one with the genius IQ and the Harvard Law degree.

She barely had a chance to open her mouth before Cody was pulling her along by her hand, leading her to his prize. Allison shook her head as she looked at the pumpkin. The thing was as big as she was, or close enough that it didn't matter. If it weighed less than a hundred pounds, she'd be shocked. It was nearly perfect; round and firm, without blemishes and the color of autumn leaves, so orange it was almost red.

The air was cool, but when she ran her hand over the gigantic thing, the flesh was warm and smelled almost sweet.

"Honey, there's no way we could get that in the car." She sighed as she said the words, knowing full well how he would respond.

"Mom, you promised!" His voice held all the sorrow of the ages, and his little face was a mask of tragedy.

"Honey, we can't take that pumpkin home. It won't fit in the car." She tried to explain it patiently, and once again was reminded that her son was only four years old. His vocabulary was really amazing, and he could certainly put together a coherent sentence, but emotionally, there was no explaining things to him in a rational tone.

Cody kicked at the dusty ground and jutted his lower lip out.

"Cody, where would we even put it?"

The old man running the show looked over in their direction and rocked a little in his chair. "I could have it delivered." His voice was drier and dustier than the ground beneath their feet.

Cody looked up at his mother, his eyes glittering with triumph. She wanted to thump the old man on the head. Something about him and about the place was still giving her the creeps.

She forced herself to smile pleasantly. "I appreciate that, but I doubt we could afford a pumpkin that size."

"Qualifies as a large pumpkin. That means it's ten dollars." He looked at her and rocked sedately in his chair. The old man's voice was

completely indifferent, as if whatever decision she made, it would have no real effect on him one way or the other.

Cody was making whining noises in his throat and while she often found it cute when he got that excited about anything, right now she wanted to shake him until he just shut up and let her think.

Allison heard Wendy calling excitedly from off in the distance. She wasn't giving out screams of alarm, so Allison figured that her daughter, too, had apparently found the perfect pumpkin.

Allison nodded. "Okay, let me get your sister and we'll finalize this."

"Does that mean you want it?" The old man nodded his head toward the pumpkin, and Allison shrugged her shoulders as if to say she was at the mercy of her children's whims. The arrangements were made a little later and Allison paid the old man his twenty dollars—delivery was free, but his boy might appreciate a tip—and they were on their way.

There was still shopping to do, and they had to go by the Halloween store in town to look over costume choices for the kids. She forgot all about the pumpkin and the old man until the next morning.

Dan came home late from work, tired but happy. He'd won the case that had been on his desk for the last year, and that meant a handsome bonus. Heather Partridge from down the street agreed to baby sit the little ones for them, and after Dan's obligatory five minutes of flirting with the girl—something he did with every female above the age of five—they went out for a celebratory dinner, where she got pleasantly buzzed and Dan talked almost endlessly about his victory in the courtroom. She honestly couldn't have cared less about any of that, but it made him happy, so she nodded and smiled.

She loved her husband, but sometimes he bored the hell out of her. To make up for that, she started playing footsy under the table and made sure to drive him just a little crazy. He didn't seem to mind.

Dan had taken Heather home and Allison had tucked the kids into bed, and shortly after that they had a rousing bout of sex. When it was all said and done, she lay back in the bed and stared at the ceiling, thinking back on Bobby and how much she missed him.

He'd always been getting her in trouble and had spent almost as much time getting her back out of it. After he disappeared, she'd sort of lost interest in everything for a while. She certainly hadn't bothered with Halloween again, not until she was in high school and going to parties.

She was still thinking about Bobby when she went to sleep.

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The following morning started with proper chaos. Dan woke her up,

## Cody's Pumpkin

smiling and sipping at his coffee. She'd managed to sleep right through the alarm, and he'd made breakfast for the kids. Happily, it was Saturday, so she could get away with a little truant behavior. "You think you could have found a bigger pumpkin?"

Allison blinked her eyes and mumbled something vaguely rude before she sat up. "What are you talking about?"

"You have a package on the front porch."

She climbed out of bed and quickly slipped her feet into her slippers, not willing to risk the cold hardwood floors so early on. Dan, saint of a man that he was, had her coffee in his free hand. She thanked him with a kiss and then yawned her way out to look at the pumpkins that had been delivered. Wendy's was large enough and had potential. Cody's was gigantic, even larger than she'd remembered, and she wondered how it was that the boards of the porch didn't crack under the weight of the thing.

Both of the kids were outside, in their pajamas, oohing and aaahing over their prizes. Cody was doing his best to hug the pumpkin, which almost looked like a drunk trying to hold up a building, but he had such a gigantic smile on his face Ally wished she had a camera.

"How the hell did they get that up here without waking the neighborhood?" Dan was speaking mostly to himself, but she wondered the exact same thing.

They spent the day preparing for Halloween around the house. It was still a week off, and far too early to carve the pumpkins if they wanted them in decent shape on the night of the big event, but there were decorations to put up and the yard to make properly spooky.

Dan always reverted into a kid himself at Halloween. He ran spider webs of linen through the three oaks in the front yard and scattered a few black rubber tarantulas through them. Then for kicks he took a cheap rubber skeleton and wrapped it inside the webs that he attached to one of the trees. It was a creepy effect that disturbed Allison and made her kids giggle. Several tombstones were set up, all of them made from Styrofoam instead of marble, and a few spotlights were set strategically in the yard to highlight the creepiest things. Skulls and scarecrows lurked around corners—all of them designed to look funny rather than scary—and a string of orange lights ran up either side of the walkway from the street, to guide wayward children to the porch where Dan would be waiting on Halloween night.

Dan and the kids had a blast, and Allison did her best to keep a smile on her face, but the more they did to make the place up, the less she felt like participating. She'd been thinking too much about Bobby and that was ruining it for her. She wouldn't let her own pathetic neurosis destroy

the occasion for her kids, however. She refused to let anything take away their childhood memories the way hers had been stripped of pleasure.

Eventually the decorations were done, and she and Dan sat on the porch, savoring the last of the warm temperatures, sipping at their glasses of wine. The kids were inside, just past the screen door, watching Disney's rendition of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

"You okay, Ally?" Dan frowned slightly as he asked, worried for her as always. Not far behind him she could see the two pumpkins where they rested.

Dan knew all about her Halloween from when she was a kid. She nodded and put on her brave face. "Yeah, I've been thinking about Bobby is all. I bought the pumpkins back where that old man's house used to be."

Dan nodded. Everyone in Beldam Woods knew the story behind the houses back there. They had been abandoned after a summer fire destroyed most of them. Old Man Harper's house had been spared the worst of it and was still crouching in the same spot, looking far worse that it had when she was a little girl. Most of them had been leveled; the idea had been to rebuild, but somehow or another, the money never got where it was supposed to, and the land developer who'd purchased all of the properties for a song had decided not to build after all. Mind you, that was the same man who'd shut down the theater in town without warning and left the building empty.

People were strange.

"Well, you handled it well with the kids, Ally." Dan smiled at her and placed his hand over hers. "Listen if you want, I'll take the kids out this year and you can stay here and handle the candy traffic. Would that be better?"

"You know what? It might be. Just a chance to relax and unwind a bit."

"So, it's done. You hand out candy, and I'll walk the munchkins everywhere."

"Well, thank you."

Dan slipped over closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders. She wasn't really cold, but she loved the gesture and the warmth it brought to her.

She woke up four times during the night, each time gasping and shivering in the relative warmth of the bedroom, and each time absolutely uncertain why she was so scared.

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## Cody's Pumpkin

Halloween morning came and found Allison exhausted. She hadn't slept well for the entire week, and even the occasional dose of over the counter sleeping pills didn't seem to help very much.

Just after breakfast it was time to carve the pumpkins, and she found the very idea was enough to make her twitchy. She looked at the gigantic pumpkin of Cody's with dread, knowing the flesh of the thing would be impossibly thick. She'd practically need a chainsaw to carve features into the damned thing.

Dan was already off and doing chores by the time she decided to ask him if he'd help with the jack-o-lanterns, so she knew it would have to be her. Neither Wendy nor Cody was going to be allowed anywhere near a knife yet. They each had ten fingers and she intended to keep it that way.

She worked on Wendy's pumpkin first. Her daughter drew the design she wanted on the face with a pencil, and then Allison carved the opening at the top allowing for her little ones to scoop out the seeds. When they were done pulling out the wet guts and pulp—a process they loved and she found disgusting—the seeds were put into a strainer. Later they'd be salted and roasted. The face was traditionally creepy, triangles for eyes and nose and a grinning mouth full of fangs. Wendy was very pleased.

When it came time for Cody's monster pumpkin, it took a little more effort. The damned thing was almost four feet tall and nearly as wide. She carved a small hole around the stem and pulled it free, literally cutting away the dry strands of pulp to lift it off. Then she had Cody draw on his face—an attempt that would need improvement, because she knew what he wanted, and that his hands weren't quite making it—and then slid the blade into the spot where the mouth would be. The kids would practically have to climb inside from the bottom in order to get the seeds out.

For just one second as the blade cut deeply, she expected the gourd to scream and to see blood flowing from it. Allison almost dropped the knife at the notion. Happily it only bled pumpkin juice.

She had to reassess her decision on Cody's pumpkin. Initially she'd thought his design was a mistake, but he corrected her several times as she started carving, and she listened to him, because it was his, after all. She was just there to make sure he didn't mangle his little hands. What had seemed like a series of odd marks that were part of what she was supposed to use to cut large holes in the gourd were actually meant to be smaller, careful markings that she didn't expect from a four-year-old's imagination. When it was done, there was a face on the pumpkin that was far more detailed than she'd expected.

The eyes were smiling, but had pupils carved into them and were

more like crescents than like wedges. The nose managed to come out looking like a silhouette of a real nose rather than like a skeletal mockery. And even the mouth that she had carved into the thing had details she had not expected him to want. Looking at it in the daylight, she could see that it was an old man's face. She was a little unsettled by it, but not to the point where it bothered her too much.

The seeds from Cody's pumpkin were huge, and she made a show of washing them off and setting the entire collection of fresh white treasures into water to soak.

When it was all done, her arms were aching and she was twice as glad that Dan was taking the kids out for the rounds. It would be much easier to just wait inside for the local children to knock on the door.

Dan barely made it home before they kids were ready. By the time he'd finished with his pet projects—buying wood for a tree fort and getting an oil change for his car—he looked as tired as she felt. He didn't try to back out on taking the kids, however, and she didn't offer.

She showed Dan what Cody had asked her to carve, and he was as impressed as she was. The face was detailed and the two of them briefly discussed getting him some art supplies, because parental pride aside, at four years old he was doing some serious work, and that sort of talent should be explored. She made sure to take a few pictures of the pumpkins, as the day was growing shorter. She wanted to be able to show it to other people when the time came.

Cody was dressed as a cowboy, complete with cap guns, and Wendy was dressed as a witch, her pointy hat set jauntily on her scalp and her rubber nose almost as big as her whole face. Allison took several pictures and made appreciative noises before wishing them a good candy hunt.

The sun was drifting behind Beldam Woods when she finally got around to lighting the jack-o-lanterns. Because she really did want her children to remember every holiday favorably, Allison took more photos of the pumpkins with her camera and with the digital camera that Dan preferred as well.

She paused a few times as the early wave of children came to get candy. A ghost, a store bought Spiderman, and two princesses showed up first. She made all the appropriate noises, but found herself drawn again and again to the ghost.

The dead were supposed to walk on Halloween, weren't they?

The very notion made her shiver.

One of the parents out on the porch looked at her and smiled, then pointed to Cody's pumpkin. "That's a creepy effect. How did you manage it?"

Allison frowned and walked outside to look at the illuminated face

## Cody's Pumpkin

and smiled. "My little boy came up with the design. I just did the carving."

"He should be in special classes...Seriously. That's amazing."

Allison looked at the jack-o-lantern again and did a double take. In the growing darkness the lines she'd made were far more clearly defined by the light inside of the pumpkin and she felt her heart trip a few times. The face of Mister Harper looked out at her, his smile a sinister thing, and his eyes glinting coldly from the face of the pumpkin. He looked much as she remembered him. The only difference was the smile; it made him seem even more insane than she remembered.

Allison managed another weak smile and thanked the man for his compliment. She didn't know what else to do.

An hour and a half later, most of the children that were coming were finished, and she was expecting her own family back soon. She felt compelled to go out and look at the face on the Cody's pumpkin a dozen times, trying hard to convince herself that she was imagining things.

Every time she looked, she saw exactly the same thing; Mister Harper—who she was sure she'd never seen smile even once in her encounters with him—smiling at her, his face a twisted mask of hatred and glee. The face almost seemed to taunt her, to say how much he'd enjoyed doing bad things to Bobby, and how much he wished he could have caught her as well.

She knew she was imagining it all, knew that she was being completely irrational, but she couldn't stand to look at the grinning face, and she kept going back to look anyway, drawn to it like a pedestrian is drawn to the sheet-covered body next to a car wreck.

"Enough, Allison, you're being silly." She spoke the words herself, but barely heard them. They were just a noise to stop her from being so alone.

The sun had gone fully down a while back and the night was getting a proper chill. Dan should have been home by now with the kids, but so far there was no sign of him.

Allison wrapped herself in a thick coat and slipped outside, ready to wait for her family to return. She took a mug of hot coffee with her and the bowl of candy for any latecomers. She slid the chair around, so she could face the stoop, and stared at nothing, the scent of roasting pumpkin and the pleasant heat from the jack-o-lanterns were her only company.

Somewhere along the way she closed her eyes, needing to rest them for just a moment, and drifted into sleep.

It was Bobby who woke her. He looked at her from behind his old skull mask and stared into her eyes. "Better wake up, Ally. It's not gonna be pretty if you stay asleep."

James A. Moore

“Bobby? Why do you keep coming back?”

“I’ve been trying to warn you, trying to tell you to get rid of that pumpkin before it bears fruit.”

“It’s all carved up, Bobby.” Her voice was slurred with exhaustion, and she shrugged her shoulders. “It can’t hurt anyone.”

“He buried me back there, Ally.” His voice was a desperate whisper. “He buried me in his pumpkin field and I wasn’t the only one. I had a lot of company, Ally, and we were all stuck there, stuck in the roots and used to feed his crop. He really was a bogeyman.”

Bobby stepped aside and let her look at Cody’s pumpkin. The flesh had blackened, rotting away in select spots so that the face carved into it was changed into something far more sinister, with drooping eyes and a mouth that sneered rather than smiled.

“He was just an old man, Bobby. And we scared him. We caused what happened. I just wish you hadn’t been caught by him.” She had so much more she wanted to say to him, but the words refused to come to her.

“I wasn’t the first, Ally. I won’t be the last. He’s a goblin, a monster, and he only hunts on Halloween. It’s the only time he’s allowed to hunt anymore.”

Allison woke up with a start and shivered violently. She didn’t know how long she’d been out, but the lights in the pumpkins had burned away and the air had a tinge of frost.

She sat up stiffly in her chair and reached for her mug of coffee. It was as cold as the evening air. Allison forced down the panic that wanted to grow inside of her, because she couldn’t imagine that Dan would have left her sleeping on the porch.

She walked into the living room and knew that her children had not come home. It was too tidy. Still she moved up the stairs and checked the bedrooms, dreading the idea of finding no one. She found just that. No one had been in the upstairs.

She moved through the rest of the house with an increasing sense of anxiety and made her way into the kitchen, pushing the swinging door open hard enough to slap it against the wall.

That was empty too, except for the sink—there the pumpkin seeds she’d been soaking still rested. Water spilled from the basin and ran across the counter and down to the floor. Allison could see wet footprints marring the ground. The prints were small and belonged to a person with bare feet.

Even as she stared at the marks on the linoleum floor, she heard sounds from the sink, odd rustling noises. She moved closer, half convinced that a rat had gotten in and was making a meal of the damned

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seeds.

The hand that rose from the stainless steel pit told her otherwise. The withered fingers reached out and gripped the rim and lifted, pulling hard as if, somehow, an entire body had been forced into that sink. Wet, rustling sounds continued to come from inside, and she stepped closer, looking down at the chaos brewing within as it grew. Literally in this case; the arm was forming from one of the massive pumpkin seeds and she could see it as it grew longer, like time-lapse photography of a sprouting plant, the withered arm was erupting before her eyes.

Being a mostly sane woman at that point, Allison backed away, shaking her head. She knew who was growing in her sink, and try though she might, she couldn't deny what she was seeing.

Allison stared as the arm extended into a shoulder and chest, frail looking and liver spotted. She let out a small gasp as the head blossomed out from the pumpkin seed, the face hidden by damp white hair that fell forward as the thing growing in her sink let out a gasp and sucked in air greedily.

Allison stopped trying to push through the wall around the same time that she recognized the features she'd been dreading. Mister Harper looked almost the same as she remembered, except for being naked.

His skin was wet and glistened with moisture; his hair flopped wetly across his scalp as he looked at her, his dark eyes burning with hatred.

"You just wait there, girly. You and me, we need to have us a talk."

Allison did the only thing she could think of to do: She ran screaming from the room and bolted for the front door. The furniture that she usually had no problem getting around seemed determined to take her down, and she managed to bark both of her shins well before she got to the porch.

Allison didn't want to think, or to let emotions get in the way of escaping, which was just as well because at the moment rational thought wasn't even a possibility. She just yanked the door open and fairly flew out onto the porch.

Bobby was standing there, still in his Halloween costume, and shaking his head. "Don't come out this way, Allison. It's not pretty."

A long time ago, he'd been her best friend. Now, he was another obstacle. Allison dodged around him and moved for the steps down to the walkway, which was still illuminated by the glowing orange of the Halloween lights.

"Ally! You better come back and talk to me!" Bobby's voice was threatening in a way she never would have thought possible. Despite that, she kept running. Dan was missing, Cody and Wendy were gone too, and should have been with him. Something obscene was growing in

her kitchen sink and her best childhood friend, who had been dead for a long, long time, was barking orders at her.

Not a chance in hell she was staying around to find out why.

Mister Harper stood in front of her, his skin now died and his fine hair blowing in the mild October wind.

Allison stumbled to a halt and looked at him with wide, frightened eyes.

Bobby spoke behind her. "Ally, I tried to warn you."

Harper walked closer, the expression on his face never changing from the sneer of hatred she remembered.

Allison backed up and bumped into Bobby, who should have been nothing but a ghost, a figment of her imagination.

"I-he was still coming out of the sink."

"He's a bogeyman, Ally. He's not a real person at all. He never was."

In all of her years living in Beldam Woods—a place that had a deep, rich history for local ghost stories, Allison had never once believed in monsters, at least not the kind that weren't human. Feeling Bobby pressed against her back, seeing the old man who by all rights should have long since been in his grave, she was forced to accept that not everything could be explained away.

"I don't believe in monsters." She spoke the words without conviction.

"Ally, you should have never gone back to that place. It's where he lives, where he's always lived. You made him notice you, Ally. You made him remember you."

Allison spun fast and grabbed the shoulders of the ghost-faced boy in front of her, shaking him hard. "You're DEAD! I saw you die!" Her voice cracked, and tears fell from her eyes as she rocked his preadolescent body back and forth.

He did not struggle, did not disagree, but instead merely went limp in her hands and then collapsed to the ground. Allison looked down at him and saw the rotted flesh that showed underneath the edge of his stained, once white ghost outfit. Intermingled with the decayed skin and muscle, she could see thick green vines, the sort she knew all too well from the pumpkin patch where Harper's house used to be.

Harper spoke to her, his voice as dusty as ever, and Allison shivered as she looked in his direction. "I always knew you'd come back, Allison. Every kid comes back, sooner or later."

"What are you?" The shaking quality of her voice matched the tremors that ran through her body.

"I'm the thing that punishes naughty little children." He smiled, a

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grin that perfectly matched the image on the pumpkin she'd carved for Cody. "I'm the bogeyman."

"Why me? What did I do to you?" She crossed her arms over her chest and shivered, the cold of the night catching up with the chill that seemed to run through her mind and soul.

"Because you threw the balloon!" he roared, his mouth stretching into a snarl that didn't seem possible. "You were a good girl until then, Ally, but you threw the balloon and signed your own death warrant!"

"It was just water!" Allison shook her head and stepped back from him, tripping over the rotting lump that had been Bobby Fulver only a few minutes earlier. "It was just a fucking water balloon!"

"It's not the weapon, Ally; it's the decision to throw it." His voice sounded strange this time, worse than the usual sepulchral whisper. It only took her a second to understand why. The words came from two different directions at once.

Allison looked behind her and saw a damp version of the man leaving her house.

"How?"

"Every seed you scraped from Cody's pumpkin is another chance for me to get to you, Allison. There is no escape. I will own you body and soul."

Allison gave up trying for explanations, an idea forming in her head. She ran across the lawn toward her SUV and scampered inside, grateful for her laziness when it came to locking the doors. She was twice as happy when she found the car keys in her jeans pocket.

Not one, but two Mister Harpers came at her, running hard for the vehicle even as she started it up. One of them ran behind her SUV and she gunned the engine, backing the gas-guzzler over him even as he was heading for the passenger's side. The impact rocked her in her seat and did it a second time as the wheels backed over the old man she knew could not be real.

Bobby had told her all she needed to know, if she was lucky. Allison slammed the automatic transmission into drive and rode over the man a second time. The headlights showed her what was left after the first impact and let her see very clearly that Harper wasn't human. Most of what she saw inside his shattered remains looked gray, not red, and she could see the pulpy mass of seeds and guts that spilled from his abdominal cavity.

He was still moving, still trying to get to her, and she hit the gas as hard as she could, desperate to get away from her nightmare. The other version of her childhood terror ran after her, but was no competition for her Ford.

Beldam Woods was not a large place and likely never would be, but it was still a rough trip to the edge of the town. Allison managed to stay on the road despite her high speed and twists and bends that added to the challenge. She pulled into the empty parking lot of the Punkin Patch and killed the motor and the headlights as quickly as she could. For two full minutes she listened for the sounds of anyone or anything coming her way.

When she thought she was safe, Allison slipped out of her SUV and opened the rear hatch. There were a few things that Dan insisted she have with her whenever she was driving. Aside from her cell phone, a real spare tire and a couple of road flares, she had a first aid kit and two gallons of gasoline. She pulled off one fingernail and sprained all hell out of her back hauling the gas from the compartment where it was stored.

Allison grunted and strained as she carried the metal can into the remains of the pumpkin patch. She opened the canister as she walked and poured gas on the ground where ever she found a thick runner of vines. She used strategy in her efforts, and managed to surround the long abandoned house with regular unleaded.

When she was done, Allison pulled out one of her road flares, ignited it and threw it into the field where she now knew Bobby had been buried. The dried vines and wet gasoline went up with an explosive noise, bleeding fire into the cold night air. Allison watched as the vines blackened, and hissed like snakes, actually moving around as the heat cooked them.

Off in the distance, the house where Old Man Harper had lived glowed in the growing flames, and Allison saw the withered figure of the man who had sold her the pumpkins as he came out of the battered front door.

“You think you’re a smart one, don’cha!” He walked across the warped porch of the house and stopped almost exactly where she’s seen the old man struggling with Bobby so long ago.

“You leave me alone!” Her voice broke as she cried out, the heat from the blaze irritating her eyes, and the smoke catching in her throat.

“I haven’t even started with you yet, missy.” His eyes narrowed in his pinched old face, and she recognized him for what he was—a vile creature that had survived for far too long in a human guise.

He stood and stared at her, not even trying to reach her through the field of burning plants. The vines writhed actively now, and the smell that came off of them was as ripe and foul as rotting meat.

“Oh, I don’t have to touch you, little girl. I have other ways of taking care of you, don’t I?”

“What do you mean?” She spoke softly as dread crawled into her

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body. Not fear, not that crisp energizing emotion that let her act, but dread that seemed to suck every bit of willpower from her.

“Seen Cody lately?” The old man kept smiling, rocking back and forth on his heels, even as the flames caught up with him and set his pant legs ablaze.

Allison almost charged him. It took an effort not to run through the growing fires to get to the old bastard and beat his face in.

“What did you do to my son?”

He didn’t answer her. Instead, he lifted his head toward the sky and stood in place, as his skin began to smolder, letting off plumes of thick black smoke. The old man collapsed in the fire and was consumed by it.

Allison got into her Ford and drove away, not looking back even once. She was beyond rational thought, lost in worry about her children, her husband, everything that she valued in the world.

She was home only a few minutes later. The ground where Bobby’s body had been was scorched, as was the concrete of the driveway where Old Man Harper’s double had been smashed into it. There was no sign of the other old man, and a quick check of the house confirmed that Dan, Wendy and Cody were still not back. As she stood on the porch waiting, she heard the sound of the fire engines leaving their station, the sirens calling out a warning that they had a blaze to contain.

The bell at the Lutheran church rang out twelve times with clear, lonesome notes. The sounds seemed to match perfectly with how she was feeling.

“They’ll come home. They have to. They just lost track of the time.”

She said the words again and again, whispered them to herself and to God, and waited.

## **31 syllables for Halloween**

**Rob Walker**

as a child,  
I had no pumpkin to carve  
not much food—  
very often we would starve

my jack-o-lantern  
was sister's severed head...



# Flesh

By Craig Phillips

**I awake hyperventilating, as if from a nightmare**, damp, afraid. If only it were a dream, but it feels so palpably real.

It appears that I'm on a field where strips of dirt crisscross patches of dry, faded grass. The sky is as black as ink and, judging from the position of the moon, I estimate it within an hour of midnight. A wet jacket of fog has fingered its way through the trees and across the pasture. Soon it is so thick I cannot see more than a few feet in front of my face. I am unnerved by the plaintive cry of a wolf in the neighboring woods, and think now would perhaps be a time to vacate the premises.

But now I realize something extremely unfortunate: I cannot move. I feel a strong desire to have an out of body experience, thinking that if I really am in a dream I can will this to be so—but nothing happens. Then,

## Craig Phillips

as if on cue, the mist swirls in and envelopes me, yet instead of remaining anxious I find it strangely comforting, a baby's security blanket eventually lulling me into a state of sleep.

I am jarred awake by the sounds of children laughing. For a moment I am comforted by this and by the warmth from sunlight striking my flesh. A little girl, perhaps eight, nine years of age, her sneakers caked with mud, approaches me. She has an ashen complexion, chalky hair and hollowed eyes. I want to speak to the girl, to ask her who she is and where I am, but before I can come to my senses, she disappears from view. Things go dark.

Now I feel like I am floating, a disembodied spirit. I hear a woman's voice speaking German, but she sounds beyond my reach, in the ether, in the abyss of blackness. The woman says "*Vorsichtig*" and suddenly I stop floating. Then she says, in thickly accented English, "Careful with him, don't hurt him, he's had a long journey... *leicht*, careful, careful." I begin to make out shapes, but the world remains obscured in shadows. Hands poke at me; hands caress my body. I feel a sense of solace. Then, at last, light.

I am in a small white room, a kitchen. The same little girl is here, and a boy I presume to be her brother. Standing over them is an older lady, gray hair hanging down in strands, a shawl covering her shoulders. She wears a dour expression and shakes her head at me. I feel as if I've failed but am unsure what it is I have failed at. The little girl moves to me and runs her fingers across my skin.

The old woman pulls her gently away from me, and flicks the light off. She repeats the phrase "*Gutten nacht*", "*Gutten nacht*, children", but says it in this whispery, wispy voice that still somehow manages to reverberate in my head, into my skull. I hear footsteps trailing away, and then all is silence again.

A clock ticks loudly, to the point of distraction, until it finally gets bored with this and chimes twelve times—midnight. Can a full day really have passed? I try to sleep, but the paradox of sleeping while in a dream amuses me. A cat enters the space. I smell it at first, then hear the telltale mewling of an animal under the spell of catnip. The cat does a few loops in the room—I can hear the *clickity click* of its nails across the tiled floor. And then this creature of the night is suddenly upon me, I see nothing but its green eyes looming and feel the hot exhalation as it sniffs at me. I try to squirm away but am anchored, still rendered unable to move. Whoever put this hex on me has done an exceptional job. The cat loses interest and moves away, but close enough where I can hear it purring. The rhythm dulls my senses and I drowse off. I awake.

A hand is upon my head. The cat makes a woeful yowl. Suddenly I

## Flesh

am lifted up and whirled around to come face to face with the woman. She says, *Gutten morgen* and smiles in away that does not reassure me. The little girl is behind her, upset. She can no longer look at me. She has a pen in her hand and a guilty look upon her face. The woman says something to her that I cannot hear, and suddenly I catch the gleam of metal floating in the air.

A knife! It methodically rips into my body, the old woman like a surgeon carving away until the terrible, piercing pain I felt at first begins to fade away, as if endorphins are kicking in. The little girl comes up to me, bashfully; she has a spoon in her hand, which she reluctantly sticks into me.

My final memory: the sight of my own pulpy, orange flesh being dropped unceremoniously onto newspapers strewn across the floor. My own seeds, now lifeless and cast aside like common garbage, dot the landscape below.

I remain now, untethered to any body, biding my time, praying for reincarnation. To come back as a hand that could hold that knife and return the favor—I'd show that woman *gutten nacht*.





# The Funhouse

## Part II

J.G. Faherty

*Part One can be found in Wicked Karnival # 5*

**Inside the Hall of Mirrors, Taylor and Regina howled** with laughter at the reflection in front of them. The warped glass expanded their stomachs and shrank their heads, turning them into human bowling pins.

“Oh, God, I can’t laugh any more, my stomach hurts,” gasped Regina.

“Yeah, I can’t believe how many different mirrors they have. This is the longest Hall of Mirrors I’ve ever been in!” said Taylor.

They'd been stretched, compressed, bent, and turned into bug-eyed strangers, but the next mirror was the oddest. The image in it showed two perfectly normal bodies, but no heads.

"Wow, that's freaky. How do they do that?" Taylor asked, bending and ducking, trying to bring his head into view. No matter what he did, his body ended at the shoulders.

"I don't know, but I don't like it," responded Regina. "C'mon, let's skip it."

The next mirror was worse. This time it showed two headless torsos lying on the ground, arms and legs missing, blood pooled around them. The bodies were recognizable as their own by the clothing.

"This isn't funny anymore," Taylor called out, shielding Regina from the gory scene.

"Let's get out of here, I want to find Elissa and the others," begged Regina.

"Sure, babe, I've had enough, too." They hurried through the room, trying not to look at the reflections surrounding them—a grotesque variety of disfigured, mutilated bodies—until they were brought up short by a large mirror blocking their way.

The mirror stretched across the hall with no room to go around it. The image inside looked deceptively normal, just the two of them standing there, until from behind them a tentacled creature rose up and grabbed them, dragging them backwards towards its gaping mouth. Their mirror-selves kicked and struggled, mouths open in silent screams. So realistic was the scene that Taylor whirled around, expecting to see the monster behind them.

"Taylor, how are we going to get out of here?"

"Easy. Stand back." He lifted one foot and drove his heavy work boot into the glass, shattering it with a loud crash.

"Take that, motherfuck..."

The reddish-green tentacle burst forth from inside the mirror, grabbing him and cutting off his self-congratulatory shout, drawing him into inky blackness. He didn't even have time to scream before a jagged piece of glass caught his neck. The rattlesnake strike of the tentacle pulled him forward so hard that his head separated from his neck and dropped to the ground as the body disappeared into the eternal darkness.

Regina's mouth moved up and down, making a low 'Uh-uh-uh' sound. She turned to run back the way they'd come, but a second tentacle shot out of the Stygian black, grasping her around the waist. Razor-sharp suckers tore through her clothing and penetrated her skin—the heavily-muscled appendage constricted the air from her lungs in a harsh cough. She struggled against the slimy, rubbery flesh, but as it drew her into the

## The Funhouse

place beyond the mirror she began to weaken from lack of oxygen.

Moments later she lost consciousness completely, although not before more of the thick tentacles, many of which ended in mouths filled with tiny, sharp teeth, violated every orifice of her body.

One last appendage snaked out of the hole in the mirror, feeling around the floor until it touched Taylor's head. With surprising dexterity, the tentacle curled around the head and pulled it into the darkness. In its wake, the mirror regenerated, the glass reforming and becoming whole again.

In the Hall of Mirrors, all was silent.

In a place farther away than human minds could imagine, the air was filled with screams.

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Matty woke slowly, consciousness returning in jigs and jags, sputtering like a poorly-maintained motor. Next to him, Sara lay on her back, eyes closed. He reached over and shook her shoulder, the movement causing his vision to blur momentarily. "Sara, wake up." Nervous tingling ran from his chest, down through his stomach to his scrotum at the thought she might be dead. The fear washed away as she uttered a low moan.

"Sara, it's Matty. I'm right here. Open your eyes."

She did and then moaned again.

"Take it slow. Don't try to sit up yet. Are you all right?" She nodded.

Matty rose to his knees and looked around. They were in a cave—the walls and floor hard-packed dirt. Flickering torches in wall sconces provided dim light and made shadows dance against the walls. Other bodies lay nearby: Roger, Jordan, and Kerri. Matty crawled over and shook Jordan awake, moving on to the others when Jordan opened his eyes and spoke. Soon all of them were sitting up and coherent.

"I can't believe Elissa is dead," Roger whispered, tears flowing down his cheeks. Kerri had broken the news to him. Now she and Sara sat apart from the boys, holding each other and sobbing softly.

"Dude, this place is seriously fucked up," Jordan said to Matty. "How are we gonna get out?"

Before Matty could respond, a neon EXIT sign lit up, illuminating a small doorway.

"There's your answer," Matty told him. "Looks like we haven't finished with the Funhouse yet."

"Fuck this place, and fuck everyone at this carnival," snarled Roger. "I'm not playing their games anymore. Those bastards killed Elissa."

## J. G. Faherty

"No, Mister Esposito, your friend Jordan killed Elissa." The Proprietor emerged from the flickering shadows as if made from them, all contrasting darkness and bright colors. His angular, white face glowed like a living skull in the torchlight. "Had he obeyed the rules, your girlfriend would have been safe, if somewhat uncomfortable, until I retrieved her."

"That's bullshit!" Jordan cried. "She shouldn't have been in there at all. And we're through with you and your carnival."

"You're through when I say you're through!" the Proprietor bellowed, his mouth so distended that a person's head could easily have fit inside it. Multiple rows of triangular, sharp teeth glittered in the dim light. Black eyes burned with sudden red fire in the demonic countenance.

Jordan backed up a step from the monstrous visage while Matty placed himself in front of Sara and Kerri. "Do not anger me, Mister Faithe." The Proprietor's eyes dimmed to a dull yellow, and his mouth retracted to normal size. "If you want to see your precious friends again, you will finish your trip through the Funhouse. In fact," the Proprietor added, his voice taking on an oily, cajoling tone, "It's possible you might even find Miss Jones alive and well. After all, what fun is a carnival without illusions?" The Proprietor chuckled, the deep sound bubbling from his throat like swamp gas, and then gradually dimming as his body faded back into the shadows it had originated from.

"What the fuck?" asked Jordan, turning around and looking at the others. "Is this all illusions, or is it real?"

"No clue," Matty told him. "I guess we keep going and find out." He grabbed three torches from the wall, handing one to Roger. Jordan took another.

"If there's any chance that Elissa's alive, we have to find her," Kerri said. "Then we can get Taylor and Regina and get the hell out of this place."

Sara took her hand, and together they followed Jordan and Matty through the dark doorway, Roger bringing up the rear.

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The combined light of the three torches cast a glow that did little to dispel the impenetrable blackness of the tunnel. Matty had no idea how long they had been walking because everyone's watches showed exactly midnight. *Right after we entered the carnival*, he realized.

After what seemed like miles of walking, Jordan held up a hand. "Hey, I think I see something up ahead. It looks like another cave."

## The Funhouse

Matty peered over Jordan's shoulder to see. The new chamber was a twin to the one they'd left, except that this one had three doors, all in a row. The plain wood was unmarked by signs or windows.

"Let's each take a door and see where they go," Roger said. Matty put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"Wait a sec. That's how we got in trouble the last time, going in different directions. I think we should stick together."

"Screw that. The faster we check out each door, the faster we get out of here. If you all wanna stay together, fine." Roger shook off Matty's hand and moved forward, opening the door farthest to their right.

The doorway led out to an inhospitable landscape where a silver sun cast harsh metallic light across a stark, desolate land. A scattering of house-sized boulders provided the only respite from flat, endless sands. In the distance stood a castle. Even from far away, the indistinct building triggered an involuntary shiver in Matty. He realized he felt an almost primitive, instinctive desire to stay as far away from the distant building as possible.

As they stood staring out at the alien panorama, a scream sounded from the other side of the door.

"What was that?" Sara asked.

The scream came again, louder. "Help! Roger, help me!"

"That's Elissa!" Roger shouted. He jumped through the doorway. A shimmering wave blurred his features for a moment, and then he was on the other side, standing in the desert sand.

Jordan rushed to the door, but Matty grabbed his arm, holding him back. "Don't do it!"

"Roger!" Sara and Kerri both shouted his name but he didn't reply; didn't even look in their direction.

"I don't think he can hear us," Matty told the others.

"That's ridiculous," Jordan said. "He's only five feet away."

Roger turned a slow circle, and then moved towards them, hands held out as if blind. Just when it looked as if he'd come back through the door he went past, disappearing from view. They called his name again, but still received no response. After a moment he reappeared, this time walking away from them. With his back to the door, he stopped and spoke for the first time.

"Matty? Jordan? I can't see you anywhere. Where's the doorway?"

From beyond their line of sight, Elissa's reanimated body appeared, causing Sara to squeal and Matty and Jordan to back away from the door. Her flesh was gaunt, lifeless; her abdomen hollowed out so that bloody ribs showed. A terrible bite mark marred her throat.

As Sara and Kerri shrieked for Roger to *turn around, to run away,*

the corpse grabbed him from behind, at the same time lunging forward and clamping its jaws on his neck. Blood spurted out, spraying Elissa's gray, mottled face, soaking Roger's shirt, and running onto the sand of the otherworldly desert.

"Gaah!" Roger's cry of pain ended in a choking, wet gasp. The animated cadaver dragged him down to the ground and began tearing mouthfuls of flesh from his body and eating them. Roger twitched and kicked for a minute longer and then went still.

As the thing that had been Elissa cannibalized her boyfriend, tiny demons appeared, scampering and capering about, helping themselves to the snippets of flesh that fell from Elissa's mouth as she chewed. The imps, some with smooth red skin, and others covered in iridescent scales, laughed and danced on miniature cloven hooves.

"I'm gonna be sick," gasped Sara, turning from the repugnant tableau. Kerri led her away as Matty stepped forward and pushed the door closed, cutting off the gruesome sight of their friend's death. Leaning against the rough wood, he tried to ignore the retching sounds coming from the back of the cave.

"What if the other two rooms are like that?" Jordan asked in a husky croak.

"We'll have to open both of them before we decide what to do," Matty told him. "We'll pick whichever one seems the safest."

Jordan nodded and went to the center door. After he pulled it open, it only took a second for them to realize they were looking at the Hall of Mirrors. A moment later Taylor and Regina came into view. Jordan yelled to them, but again there was no indication that sound could travel to the other side.

"We should go through," he said. "At least we'll all be together."

"Okay," agreed Matty. "I'll get Sara and Kerri." He walked over to his girlfriend, who sat against the far wall of the cave, her face buried in her hands, shoulders shaking. The acrid smell of vomit filled the air. "C'mon, Sara, we're going through to Taylor and Regina, and then we'll all leave."

Sara looked up at him, black mascara smearing her cheeks. "Thank God. Where are they?"

Matty began to tell her, but a shout from Jordan brought them back to witness the tentacled creature bursting through the broken mirror and taking Taylor and Regina.

"Oh, shit," murmured Jordan when it was over.

"There wasn't anything we could do," Matty said, not just to Jordan but to all of them. "If we'd gone through, we'd be just as dead right now." He gave Sara's hand a quick squeeze. "I'm gonna open the last

## The Funhouse

door. Everyone stay back.”

Gripping the knob, Matty said a silent prayer, and then pulled the door open. At first the brightly-colored room confused him with its floor made of whirling disks. Then he realized it was another room in the Funhouse.

“Well?” asked Jordan, coming up next to him.

“I think we should go for this one,” Matty said. “We know the other two rooms have monsters in them. At least this one doesn’t look like anything can hide in there and surprise us.”

“Let’s do it, then.” Jordan agreed. One by one, they stepped through the door.

Inside the Funhouse, Matty went to step forward onto the first disk, but Jordan stopped him. “Be careful,” he advised, pointing down. The edges of the disks were razor-sharp. One wrong step and it would be easy to lose a foot or leg. Taking a deep breath, he moved forward, timing his steps as he jumped from one disk to the next. Once across, he signaled to the others. Eventually all four of them stood together on the far side. Matty gave them a minute to catch their breaths, and then led them through to the next room.

“What the hell is this?” Jordan asked. Before them lay a horizontal tunnel, revolving slowly around and around with alternating black and white lines spiraling away to a circle of pure darkness. Matty remembered it from other carnivals; the object was to try and walk through without being spun up the side and knocked on your ass.

“The answer to your problems, if you are bold enough,” came the Proprietor’s voice from all around them, the disembodied words reverberating through the air.

“The tunnel before you leads back in time. If you are careful, you can use it to revisit the past and, should you so desire, go back and change specific events. You would keep all your memories intact, giving you the ability to change everything that has happened tonight and save your friends from their most unfortunate deaths.” One of the Proprietor’s gurgling, clotted laughs filled the air before he continued speaking.

“Of course, if your courage is lacking, the exit lies to your right. You can leave the Funhouse and the carnival, knowing you did nothing to save your friends when you had the chance.” The throaty, dark chuckle grew fainter until it disappeared, leaving them alone to stare at each other in silence. A neon Exit sign lit up off to one side, while at the end of the tunnel the blackness gave way to color, and scenes began to play out as if on a giant movie screen.

A view from early European history appeared—a much smaller carnival rolling into a village, the exhibits pulled along by horses. Time

moved forward in fast motion, the dress of the people indicating the historical period. From the seventeen and eighteen hundreds into the twentieth century, Europe to America, gingham dresses and overalls gave way to blue jeans and leather motorcycle jackets.

The carnival came to one town after another, the rides and attractions changing but the figure of the Proprietor remaining constant throughout—his Ichabod Crane figure welcoming guests in every era, his skullish face never aging.

Finally the four friends watched themselves standing before the entrance to the carnival that very night. Then the screen went black before the history of the demonic carnival began again from the beginning.

Over and over the loop played, and Matty realized that the speed at which the years went by would make it almost impossible to judge exactly when to step through. A moment too soon or too late and you would wind up years, or even centuries, away from your destination.

As the historical sequence rolled on, Matty turned to the others. “We have to chance it, it’s the only way to save them.”

“No!” Sara poked him in the chest with her finger. “It’s suicide! We have to save ourselves.”

“There’s another solution,” Jordan spoke up. “Two of us go back in time and the other two go get help.”

“Fine, you go for help,” Matty said.

“No!” cried Sara again, tears running down her face.

“Sara, I have to. I can’t walk away and leave them dead. But Jordan, there’s one problem.” Matty pulled Jordan close.

“What?”

Placing his mouth next to Jordan’s ear, he whispered, “You can’t go for help. No one’ll believe you. You’ve got to stop the carnival from opening tomorrow. Even if I manage to save Elissa and the others, we can’t let the carnival open, it’s too dangerous. Do whatever you have to do, but do it tonight. And don’t say anything out loud ‘til you leave.”

Jordan nodded and then gave his best friend a hug. “Take care, man. I’ll be waiting for you. C’mon, girls, we’re getting out of this hell hole.”

Jordan and Kerri went out the exit; Sara took two steps after them and then turned around, looking back at Matty. “You don’t have to come,” he told her. “Go with Jordan. You’ll be safer.”

Sara sighed and walked over to Matty, taking his hand. “No, I’m staying with you. Maybe I can keep you out of trouble.” She leaned up and kissed him, long and hard.

When the kiss ended they walked towards the entrance of the tunnel. Time reeled by at the other end, and Matty tried to judge when to start.

## The Funhouse

Once inside, it would be hard to keep a steady pace but he figured they could pause at the end until the right moment appeared.

The first few steps they barely kept their balance on the rotating floor. Then, just as they began to move more confidently, a roar sounded behind them. Matty cursed as the Man-Beast came charging into the room.

“Run!” Matty shouted, pulling Sara down the tunnel. Behind them, the Man-Beast struggled to remain upright as he entered the revolving attraction.

Matty and Sara hurried through the corkscrewing pattern, using their hands against the sides of the tunnel to steady themselves. As they neared the end, Matty pulled them to a halt. “Wait, we have to go through at the right time,” he shouted. The Man-Beast had dropped to all fours and was rapidly closing the gap that separated them.

“Hurry!” Sara shrieked, and the Man-Beast howled in response.

Matty glanced at the time screen, where the nineteen nineties were ending. “Get ready,” he told her as he grasped her hand again. “Almost...now!” He stepped forward but a strong tug on his hand and Sara’s scream stopped him. Falling to his knees, he looked back to find the Man-Beast gripping one of Sara’s cowboy boots and slowly dragging her backwards. Matty grabbed her arms and pulled as hard as he could, the two of them flew backwards as the creature let go. Before Matty could stop their motion, they fell out of the tunnel and back in time. The Man-Beast smiled as they disappeared, then turned and crawled in the opposite direction.

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Jordan led Kerri through the carnival, moving from tent to tent, staying in the shadows. Fifteen minutes later they stood outside the carnival grounds, panting clouds in the brisk October air.

“What did Matty say to you back there?” Kerri asked him.

“There’s something we need to do,” he told her.

A little more than an hour later they were back at the carnival again, each of them carrying a five-gallon can of gas. In his pockets Jordan had two lighters and three packs of matches. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Kerri asked.

“It’s the only way,” he said. “If Matty and Sara fixed things, they’d all be back by now, and we wouldn’t be here. We have to make sure no one can come to the carnival tomorrow.” Jordan pulled Kerri close and gave her a hug. “Now, get home as fast as you can. If I get caught, you need to make sure no one thinks you ever left the house tonight.”

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“Be careful, I don’t want to have to come visit you in jail,” Kerri whispered against his cheek. Jordan kissed her, then watched as she ran off into the night. He picked up the first gas can and began splashing the ticket booth. By the time both cans were empty, he’d doused portions of several tents and booths. He managed to light them all on fire before a heavy blow to his back knocked him to the ground. The weatherbeaten, scarred face of the tall carny from the Funhouse booth loomed over him, the man’s eyes glowing red as he stared down at Jordan.

Jordan had time to say a quick prayer for Kerri before a large shoe made contact with his head and the flickering orange light of the fires disappeared.

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“Can I go in and see him now?” Kerri asked Jordan’s mother. They stood at the door to Jordan’s room at Harbor Hills Mental Health. A small window showed Jordan’s prone form lying on a small cot.

“Yes, but the attendant will have to stay in the room with you. It’s a hospital policy. Even though Jordan hasn’t been violent, the doctors say he still isn’t focused mentally.”

“Do they know what’s wrong?” Kerri questioned her.

“He’s still insisting he had to burn down the carnival because it was filled with demons. He says the demons killed your friends. It’s just a miracle no one died in the fire or Jordan would’ve been charged with murder. The police don’t believe he had anything to do with the disappearances.”

“Then what do they think happened to everyone?”

“Chief Talbot told us he believes Jordan might have witnessed some of the carnival workers do something to your friends, and that whatever he saw put him over the edge. The police want to investigate the carnival, but they can’t find out where it’s gone.”

Kerri nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Ever since she’d heard of Jordan’s arrest for attempted arson, the past two days had been a blur. This was the first chance she’d had to talk to him since she’d left him at the carnival.

An attendant joined them. “You can see him now,” he said.

“Go ahead, dear,” Mrs. Faithe told Kerri. “I’ll wait until you’re finished. Maybe he’ll respond better to you.”

The attendant stood discretely by the door as Kerri entered the room. Moving to Jordan’s side, Kerri grasped his hand, ignoring the strap holding his arm to the bed.

“Jordan,” she whispered, trying to keep her voice from the attendant.

## The Funhouse

“Jordan, it’s Kerri. Can you hear me?”

Jordan opened his eyes and looked at her. He looked awake and aware, and his softly-spoken words to her backed up her opinion. “Kerri, are you all right? Did you get in any trouble?”

“No, I told the police that I didn’t go ‘cause we’d had a fight. I tried to say you couldn’t have done it, but the police told us what you said about demons. They think you’re crazy.”

“Good. That was my plan the whole time. If I just set the place on fire, they’d throw me in jail and I’d never get out. My only chance was the looney bin. The only problem is, no one will tell me what happened after I got arrested.”

Kerri glanced at the guard before lowering her voice even further and answering. “From what I heard, the police searched the carnival but didn’t find any trace of Matty or the others. When they went back the next morning, the carnival was gone. According to your mom, they’re still trying to find out where it went to.”

“They’ll never find it,” Jordan told her. “It’s a Halloween carnival, remember? It won’t be back until next year. You gotta help me, Kerri. We have to rescue the others.”

“How?”

“You’ve got twelve months. Find out everything you can about that carnival, where it’s been, where it might show up next. We know it’s been around a long, long time. We have to be there next year, whatever town it comes to, so we can go through the tunnel, go back and set everything right. I’m gonna keep acting crazy, and when the time comes you’re gonna have to break me out of here. Are you in?” Jordan stared up at her, his blue eyes clear and alert. She didn’t hesitate.

“I’m in.”

\*\*\*

Matty and Sara emerged from the tunnel off-balance, stumbling and falling to the ground. Matty jumped up, afraid the Man-Beast might have followed them, but the tunnel was no longer there. Instead they found themselves in a cleared field, surrounded by people dressed in the long frocks and black suits made so familiar from the chapters on Colonial America in their history texts.

“Ho! These persons have appeared from nowhere!” a man yelled, pointing at them.

“Demons!” shouted a woman.

“Witchcraft!” accused another. “Arrest them!”

Matty and Sara tried to fight back against the tide of people who

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converged on them, but their struggles were in vain. All too quickly they found themselves locked in a cell, awaiting trial for witchcraft.

That night, as they discussed escaping and making their way back to the carnival, a visitor came to see them. Tall and gaunt, he was dressed in a red jacket and matching pants with a black top hat that rode above his ghostly pale face. In one hand he held the head of their jailer—in the other, a set of iron keys.

“Mister Ash, Miss An, so nice to see you again,” the Proprietor said as he glared at them through the bars of their cell. “Your friend Jordan Faithe has caused me immeasurable trouble. Someone has to pay for that. I believe it shall be the two of you.” He snapped his fingers and the scar-faced carny stepped into view. He held a gleaming scalpel and a small leather satchel. Glowing redness filled his eye sockets, flaring and dancing as if actual fires burned in his skull.

“Time is relative in the Carnival of Fear. I think you’ll come to appreciate that over the next several hundred years. You’ll make fine additions to our family, once Molach has finished some minor modifications to your appearance. I’ve been wanting to add Siamese twins to the Freak Show for quite some time.”

The Proprietor glided down the stone hallway, his dark laughter accompanying him as Sara and Matty’s screams echoed through the jail.



# Hallow-inn

Jenny Schwartz

**Kath sneezed.**

The old inn was dusty, musty, and cobweb smeared. It was also eerie, something Kath hadn't felt on her previous visits. Perhaps because this was the first time she was there without friends, family, architects, or trades-people.

Her own inn. The thought delighted Kath, but not today. Something was wrong at the inn.

A chill wind blew through the parlour, chased along the hallway and up the staircase. Kath shivered at the odd notion that the wind pursued her.

"Ridiculous," said Kath. "A building over two hundred years old and

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unlived in for decades is bound to have draughts." Shutters on the windows had fallen off long ago, but something crashed against the stout brick walls. "Tree branch," Kath hesitated at the top of the stairs. It no longer seemed sensible, being alone at the inn with night drawing in. "Get dog," Kath added to her To Do List.

But a little thing like imagination wasn't going to stop Kathleen Margaret Annie O'Hare. She walked on into one of the double bedrooms. The inn went silent. The bedroom door slammed shut.

Now the breeze was in the room with Kath. It tugged at her hair and flapped her shirt, plastering it against her curves; woving cold fingers about her body.

"Hell," Kath leapt for the door. It resisted.

Kath flicked on her torch, wanting to dispel the creeping darkness. Something ripped the torch from her hands. Kath started to stumble through the prayers of her childhood, hands frantically searching her bag. Where was her damn cell phone?

A chuckle from the moulding remains of a canopy bed froze Kath. Unwillingly, she turned and looked.

A man, outlined in ghostly green, lay on the bed. He winked. "Come to Papa, darling."

Kath screamed.

Instantly, the door swung open. Kath fled down the stairs, straight into the cold, muscular arms of....

"Ebenezer Malaprop, at your service." The ghost resembled a romantic buccaneer; ruffled white linen shirt, form fitting breeches, dark hair and a piratical, lustful gleam in his dark eyes. "You, my darling, can call me Eb."

Kath shook herself free of the ghostly embrace. It was hard to be scared of a spirit of evil who calls himself Eb. "What are you doing in my inn?"

"Darling, I'm haunting it."

"Why?"

"Why not," Eb shrugged impressive shoulders. "Let's make ourselves comfortable and I'll tell you my story." He seized Kath's hand and pulled her into the drawing room. "There now," he beamed, as Kath plumped down on an ancient love seat, sending up a cloud of dust. Eb made himself comfortable standing by the cold fireplace, one elbow on the mantelpiece. "Are you planning to open a bed and breakfast? There are a lot of those around. You'll need an edge, like my haunting. Why not...."

Kath jumped in, before Eb could offer a partnership.

"I'm a chef. I'll be opening a restaurant as well as running the bed and breakfast. The restaurant will be my edge."

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Eb looked disappointed.

"You were going to tell me why you're haunting my inn?"

Eb coughed. "Embarrassing. Er-hmm. Killed in the middle of coupling. Cuckolded husband stabbed me before I could, ah, um," Eb searched for an un-embarrassing phrase, and settled for science. "Ejaculate."

Kath bit her lip. "So you're hanging around because of unfinished business?"

"It's not funny," Eb said, aggrieved. "Stabbed in the act. It was like tantric sex; too much power left over. It tied me to this place."

"When was this?"

"1812."

"Wow," Kath blinked. "So why haven't I heard tales of haunting?"

"Mostly I can't be bothered to make the effort," admitted Eb. "If you weren't so attractive," a lascivious leer, "I wouldn't have appeared."

"Oh, brother."

Eb watched the emotions play over Kath's face.

A lustful ghost, thought Kath. In my inn. "Eb, is there a way to free you from your haunting? Perhaps," Kath blushed. "If someone completed the sex act in the room where you died?"

"Doesn't help," Eb shook his head. "I've voyeured."

"Well, don't voyeur on me," said Kath indignantly.

"You might want to rethink that, darling. My presence seems to heighten the experience."

"I don't need your help."

"I'm sure you don't."

Kath felt those cold fingers again, in rather private places. "Cut that out."

"Can't blame a man for being interested."

"Exorcism," muttered Kath.

"So, who is the lucky man?" asked Eb, with the cheerful air of one changing the subject after an indelicacy.

"At the moment, no one, but...."

"Some man's sniffing around," finished Eb.

Kath scowled. "Mitchell Freemont does not sniff." She stalked out of the inn, offended, but they both knew she would be back, and Eb would be waiting. Partners indeed!

\*\*\*

"Katie-girl, you've no idea how dull it is being a ghost," Eb lounged in the air at waist height.

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Kath blew a lank strand of hair from her face and scowled at her personal ghost. To save money she was cleaning the inn's windows herself, and they needed three washes just to fade from encrusted grime to merely dirty. Kath was exhausted and in a filthy temper. Eb's remark and lounging presence was the last straw.

"No, Eb, I don't know how boring it is to be a ghost. Have you tried life as an overworked, unpaid innkeeper of a ramshackle inn haunted by the Americas' laziest ghost?"

Eb smiled seraphically. "Frustrating?"

"Grr," words failed Kath. She found herself seized and soundly kissed by cool, ghostly lips. She emerged, spluttering, from the embrace. "You pirate!"

Eb laughed, hands on hips. "Darling, you're lovely when you're angry."

Kath threw a wet sponge through Eb's glowing body, then stormed out of the room, down the stairs and straight into the arms of Mitch Freemont. His kiss was as effective as Eb's, but warm.

"Good man," applauded Eb. "Seize the woman, seize the day."

Kath woke from the passionate interlude. She pounded on Mitch's chest. "Let me go."

"Ah, Kath?" Mitch said warily.

"Don't mind Katie-girl," Eb lounged against a banister. "It's been a long day and she's tired. All work and no play make a dangerous woman."

Mitch blinked. "Kath, the guy is glowing."

Kath sighed and pulled herself together, which meant she snuggled closer to Mitch and mumbled an introduction. "Mitch, meet Ebenezer Malaprop, the inn's resident ghost."

"Pleased to meet you," Eb stuck out a hand.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Mitch.

"I don't recommend it," said Eb.

\*\*\*

Kath was amazed by how much Eb knew about the inn—not secret passages and panels, but stories of the people who had occupied the rooms, their tears and laughter. His stories brought the old building alive. Kath told him so, and Eb looked fleetingly serious.

"The inn's been empty a long time. People lived, loved and died here, but the memory of them passed. Maybe it's better that way, let sleeping dogs lie. Be careful, Katie-girl, that you don't wake the haunts."

Kath frowned, but Mitch wasn't listening. He rapped the solid walls

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and stamped the creaking floorboards. "The place is in good condition," his tone showed his surprise.

"The roof needs replacing," Kath crossed her fingers, careful not to dare fate. The inn was a gem and all hers. She would worry about Eb's odd warning later. "New plumbing and wiring. A new kitchen. Getting the inn clean will be a huge task. The trades-people aren't starting for a couple of weeks; meantime I'm tackling the grime."

"It's not how most people would spend a lotto win," said Mitch.

"I'm not most people."

"You're prettier," said Eb.

Kath sketched a curtsy, looking ridiculous in faded, dirty jeans.

"You should hire people to clean." Eb shared his disapproval between Kath and Mitch.

Kath's chin went up. "My inn, my job. Besides the lotto win wasn't that big. I've got a mortgage to pay."

They wandered outside, forcing their way through the tangle of undergrowth that had been a formal garden.

"Wow," Kate touched a rose reverently. "Can you believe something this fragile survived?"

"I'm buried here," said Eb, ignoring her.

"What?" Kath turned so fast she tripped over her feet. Mitch caught her.

"My brother hid my body here."

"Your brother?"

Eb coughed. "The, uh, woman I was, uh. She was my sister in law."

Mitch whistled. Kath frowned.

"My brother caught us at the inn. Stabbed me. Rebecca fainted, not a stupid woman. Zac buried me in the rose garden at midnight. I remember as he killed me, he said. 'Can't you behave decently, just once?'" The ghost of Eb shrugged. "So if you come across any bones, they're mine."

"Ugh."

\*\*\*

Kath stood in the front doorway, surveying the smooth swathe of green lawn, the tidy rose bed complete with late blooming asters and the trick or treat stalls waiting for the town's children. Opening the inn on Halloween seemed fitting, what with the inn's resident ghost and all.

"Eb, remember you promised to stay out of sight."

"Yes, ma'am," said Eb, lanky body resting easily on the porch rocker, booted feet on the railing.

"Hmm," Kath didn't quite believe him, but she had other things to

## Jenny Schwartz

worry about. Would the townspeople come to the open house? Would she have enough treats? Were the tricks funny, or merely lame?

"Don't worry," said Mitch. He gave Kath a quick kiss and looked admiringly at her elegant figure in the soft cotton dress the colour of fall leaves.

"I can't help it," Kath admitted. "This means so much to me."

Four hours later she was beaming. Parents had chauffeured their children home, sugar sated and happy, and now it was time for the adults to kick up their heels. The entrance hall and drawing room were warmly lit by festive jack o lanterns, music played quietly as a backdrop to the enthusiastic hum of conversation, and high school students, hired for the evening, circulated with trays of finger food.

Mitch crossed the hall to where Kath stood at the bottom of the stairs. He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "Does it live up to your dreams, love?"

"Yes. This is how I dreamed the inn could be; filled with people, glowing with life."

"Uh oh," said Eb.

"Eb, I warned you," Kath began. She watched the heavy copper vase under the hall mirror shudder.

"Not me. All this energy has called out the inn's sleeping haunts, the ones who didn't want to wake. I warned you when you first started renovating."

"Vaguely," said Kath. "Give me details." Involuntarily, she rubbed her cool arms, shivering against Mitch.

"They're not real ghosts," Eb's disembodied voice sounded worried. "Haunts are the energy of past emotions. There's a sailor who drank himself to death here after he grew scared of the ocean. A madam who plied her trade here and died up the coast in an old folk's home. The innkeeper who resented every day of his life. This was his family's inn, but he wanted to be a circus clown. The people here tonight and their happy energy have woken the old angers."

Eb made the explanations quickly, but even as he talked the malevolent energy in the room erupted.

The copper vase went first, spilling water and chrysanthemums across the tiled hall. Three crystal goblets shattered. Ping. Ping. Ping. The front door slammed shut, its knocker pounding furiously. Flames shot up the empty fireplace.

"Leave," the voice wailed through the room, cold air engulfing the startled and increasingly frightened guests. "Leave."

"Not on your Nellie," Kath stepped defiantly out of Mitch's embrace. Her chin tilted up and her green eyes sparkled. "This is my inn. A place

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for the living, not dried up, miserable, old geezers."

"Uh, Katie-girl."

"No, I'm prepared for this," Kath ducked into the cupboard under the stairs and emerged with a large dust buster. "I got the Reverend to bless it. It's a spirit vacuum, so stand well back, Eb."

Kath switched on the power. A purple, perfumed mist flowed into it first, followed by a slightly more recalcitrant blue and white cloud that could only be the sailor. It even smelled of ancient tobacco. The innkeeper's haunt fought the hardest. Turning the spirit vacuum where she would, Kath couldn't seem to suck him up. Ornaments hurtled through the air and the guests screamed. Mitch stood beside Kath, fists clenched, unsure how to fight the insubstantial. Kath brandished the spirit vacuum like a sword.

Behind her, the old seaman's trunk, which stood at the top of the stairs, rocked.

The trunk hurtled down the stairs. Mitch turned at Eb's curse, saw the trunk, and pushed Kath aside. He had no time to escape himself, and in the slowdown of his last moments, he saw death approach and heard Kath's horrified scream.

"Be damned if you will," roared Eb. His insubstantial body flickered between Mitch and the trunk, and for an instant, grew solid.

A clap of thunder shook the inn to its foundations, and Eb vanished. The trunk tumbled harmlessly to a stop in front of the cold fireplace. The spirit vacuum turned itself off. Kath didn't notice. She dropped it to the floor.

"Wow," the town mayor found his voice first. "That was some show." He began to clap and slowly the crowd joined in. Conversation broke out again, higher and faster. "How did you do it?"

Kath was clinging to Mitch, and it was he who answered. "Oh, with a little help from a friend."

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A white light glowed in the drawing room.

"I thought I switched off the lights," said Kath. Her voice echoed. The inn was empty of customers tonight, but Mitch would be back from his week in New York soon. Hero, the German shepherd Mitch had given Kath, whined at Kath's side. Kath shook off the eeriness and entered the drawing room. She grabbed at the doorframe.

"Eb?"

Eb sprang up from the newly upholstered love seat. "Evening, Kath. Evening, dog."

## Jenny Schwartz

Kath hugged him, crying a little. "What are you doing here?"

"The afterlife isn't what it's cracked up to be. Once I'd said hello to family and all, they offered me a chance at reincarnation. Me, as a rabbit!"

Kath smiled, bit her lip, laughed.

Eb laughed, too. "So I thought I'd come back. Give you a hand with the inn; you and Mitch and your kids, when you have them."

Kath blushed, "I know we have a lot to thank you for, Eb, but we're not naming an innocent baby Ebenezer."

"I always knew you were a woman of sense."

They grinned at each other. Kath held out her hand. "Partners?"

"Partners."

## **O is for October** **Stephen M. Wilson**

Behind unstained masks  
Wicked children's faces hide—  
All Hallow Even

Autumn mourns summer  
Orange, the color of grief  
Trees weep leafy tears

Listen to the wind  
*Día de los muertos*  
The dead speak in tongues

Bleak October night  
Something wicked this way comes  
Bradbury country



# Death Dance

Darren Franz

**"C'mon, Bobby huh?" Stacey pleaded.** She bit her lower lip. "Let's go, this place is giving me the creeps."

Bobby tossed her a glance filled with impatient annoyance. "Isn't that what we came here for? To get the creeps?"

"I know, but this is a cemetery!"

Her fingernails dug deeper into the fleshy part of his forearm. He managed to pry himself loose as he glided past the headstones, but she caught up. When she grabbed him again, she almost toppled them both over.

"Quit it." He pulled away.

"I'm scared!"

A bird took flight from a strange, twisted tree. It looked like a giant

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bat as it flew across the pregnant moon. It let out a pitiful screech, taking them both by surprise, and they jumped. Stacey bit back a scream.

"This is great!" Bobby snickered with glee. To hear the absolute joy in his voice, you would have thought they were watching the Steelers score a winning touchdown, rather than standing in a muddy graveyard on Halloween night.

He knelt down in the rolling blanket of fog, which reminded Stacey of spoiled milk. She threw down the ragged broomstick and tall black cap—accessories for the witch's costume she was wearing—too frustrated to go carrying around that crap.

Bobby took a deep breath; he could smell the dank, overturned earth (for some strange reason, the smell of the rich soil reminded him of coffee), could feel the misty drizzle sting his face like a thousand bug bites. His costume—a rainbow-colored clown suit with enormous red buttons, stuck to his skin like flypaper. Two tufts of fluorescent green hair corkscrewed out in opposite directions; his huge tomato nose on the elastic string hung askew on his sweaty face. His oversized cartoon feet squished in the mud. The greasepaint he had so carefully applied to his face back at the high school was now smeared so the big-lipped grin was only a blurry red mess. It looked as though he had been punched in the mouth.

He traded his kneeling position for a more comfortable one, sitting cross-legged Indian style next to a freshly dug grave with no marker at the head. This more permanent gesture of his, accompanied by the unwavering sound of the chirping crickets in the late autumn breeze, made Stacey uncomfortable. She crossed her arms in mock defiance, pouting.

"This is some date." The monotony of the eerie silence became too much for her to bear. "Did you do this sort of thing with other girls where you used to live?"

He nodded. The imitation hair on his head looked to her like a pair of horns. She shivered as the breeze picked up a little.

*How could I let him talk me into coming all the way out here?*

She had it in her mind to ask him, but all that came out was a single, strangled word.

"Why?"

At first, he didn't answer. His body sat unmoving like one of the headstones around them. When he did speak, his voice had lost all of its charm and warmth. Maybe it was the words he spoke, or the creepiness of their surroundings, but Bobby's voice sounded like...

...It sounded robotic.

## Death Dance

"It's a sacred ritual. The Druids used to do it every Halloween. Only then, it was called All Hallows Eve."

The needling drizzle was now a full-fledged rain. Stacey kept her arms folded across her breasts. She stood there—shifting from one foot to the other, watching the shadows for any signs of movement.

"Personally," Bobby continued in that same droning voice, his eyes still gazing across the rows of tombstones and grieving marble statues. "I like that better. All Hallows Eve. Don't you? It sounds much more..."

He just tapered off, searching for the right word. When it popped into his head, he glanced up at her. His eyes lit up like wildfire.

"...Gothic. Yeah, that's it! Gothic."

"Bobby, you're really scaring me." She laughed, trying to sound cool. The laugh came out more like a scream. "Let's go back to the party—everybody's probably wondering where we are. Besides, I'm getting soaked and I'm cold."

He would have to listen to reason now, she thought. It was really pouring. But instead of answering her pleas, he continued his crazy story.

"When the rains came during Sam Hain, the Druids believed that it was a purifying sign. A sign of purity before the Death Dance was essential to..."

"Look," Stacey said. Her voice had begun to rise with each panic-laden word she spoke. "Maybe all the girls you dated in Weirdo High back in Osh Kosh or wherever the hell you came from get turned on by this shit, but I don't! I wanna go back Bobby. Right now!"

"So go." There was no anger or regret in his voice. "It's not like I'm forcing you to stay. But you're wrong. All the other girls I dated did go for this. Maybe not at first, but they got into it in time."

"Well, not me honey. I mean, don't get me wrong, I like a good prank—same as the next girl. But this is a little out of my league. I-I mean, I'm getting spooked out here. I don't mind admitting it either."

"Then go on, but I'm staying right here. I want to see the Druids perform their Death Dance—after all, it is their holiday."

"You're crazy Bobby."

He looked away towards the mellow glow of the moon, drifting in and out of the storm clouds.

"That's what the others said. But they were all wrong."

She turned on her heel to go, and he didn't even flinch. He had meant it; none of this was a joke! She wanted to scream at him: How can you just sit there like that? How can you sit next to somebody's grave? It was morbid. It was sacrilegious! It was...

...Terrifying.

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"Will you at least walk me back to the car?"

She hated herself for asking, hated to have to beg, but she couldn't help it. She was scared out of her mind.

He only sat there, as stiff and as rigid as one of the statues that stood in silent sentinel over the dead. She wanted to rip his eyes out of his skull and burst into tears at the same time.

"Please?" Her voice hitched.

"I can't do that Stacey. The festival of the dead is about to begin. I'll miss the dance. Why don't you just sit down and watch? You might learn something."

His costume was filthy. Streaks of fresh mud swirled over his puffy pantaloons in dizzying designs. His gloved hands were splayed lifelessly at his sides, sticking in the muddied earth. It was almost ridiculous: here she was, standing in a graveyard on Halloween night with the new kid in town, a kid dressed like a reject from a Ronald McDonald look-alike contest, while she herself looked like Broom Hilda, waiting for the dead to rise so they could watch them disco! If she wasn't about to piss her pants with fright, she might have laughed.

"Fuck you Bobby!" She stormed off, trying to ascertain which way they had come. She started off at a fast trot, but after turning around, she found that she couldn't see him any more. This scared her worse than anything he had said all night and she bolted pell-mell in the general direction of the wrought iron gates.

Crying harder as she ran, the graves doubled and trebled before her eyes. A low hanging branch—like the rotting arm of a long-dead skeleton—grazed her cheek, drawing a pencil-thin line of blood. Panic closed in, smothering her. She had a painful stitch in her side. Her plastic witch's cape got caught and she shrieked. She thought at first that a corpse had risen up to snatch her from freedom and keep her locked in this hideous place forever. Then she discovered that it was only a nasty thicket of brambles, and she yanked herself free of the cape. It blew away in the wind like a vampire bat. She fell more times than she could count, tearing her black stockings and skinning her knees. Stacey searched everywhere for the gate. The entire cemetery seemed alive somehow; shadows seemed to writhe and dance—

*Dance? Death Dance...*

Beckoning to her to stay.

She heard a strange noise off to her left, and turned her head in that direction...

Bobby appeared out of nowhere. His clown makeup had run in freakish white streaks across his face. It looked like vanilla ice cream melting on a hot summer's day. An old kid's rhyme went see-sawing

## Death Dance

through her mind.

I scream! You scream! We all scream for ice cream!

"BOO!"

She almost fainted. He'd scare her that bad. She felt her heart shoot up into her throat as she tried to scream. Only a strangled gasp came out.

*This is what it feels like to die...*

She hit him as hard as she could on the shoulder. She noticed that he was laughing, and this made her angry enough to slap him again.

"Oh! Oh, Jesus. You should have seen your face! That was priceless... Oh man, that was so great!"

As the initial fear began to subside, she caught herself smiling as well.

"A...A joke? This was all a lousy joke?" She asked, but he had doubled over in a hysterical fit. Tears squirted from his eyes as he fell to the ground; he bumped his head on a tombstone.

"Oww..." He managed through wheezing gales of laughter, rubbing his hand over the bump. That got her going; she joined him on the ground.

"Oh Bobby!" he mimicked, still trying to control another burst of giggles. "You're really scaring' me!" His face was turning from beet red to a darker shade of plum as he wiped at his eyes, smearing the greasepaint even further. "Oh this is just too much!"

"Why you little shit!" She jumped on him, relief washing over her like a warm, comforting bath.

They lay on the wet ground, their costumes all but ruined.

"You sounded too damned convincing."

"I should," he said, still snickering. "I do it every year."

"Do they always fall for it?"

"Yeah. Eventually. You were a tough cookie to crumble though, let me tell you." He smiled at her in that handsome way of his and continued. "Sometimes I hand them a line about being a Druid myself, and that I'm looking for a sacrifice. I go into the whole 'Death Dance' thing, like why the Druids used to watch their kills as they died for omens and premonitions of the future. Crap like that."

"It still sounds morbid." She kissed him on his smeared clown-lips and tweaked his bulbous nose with a cute little giggle.

"You're right. Sometimes I even scare myself with all that shit."

"Did you make it all up?"

"No, I read it in a book somewhere. I think my grandfather gave it to me."

They sat in silence for a while, enjoying the cool autumn breeze as it dried the perspiration from their bodies. When an owl hooted, startling

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them, Bobby said, "God, I'll never forget that look on your face."

"Ha-ha-ha, very funny," she tucked a lock of her raven black hair behind her ear. "Can we go now?"

"Absolutely," he stated with his best, who-loves-ya-baby grin plastered across his face. "Can I have another kiss first?"

She smiled radiantly back at him; smiled at the fact that he had asked for one and she thought that it was just the cutest thing she had ever heard.

They embraced, and as he pulled the large hunting knife with the jagged edge from the ruffles and frills of his clown suit, he stroked her long ebony hair aside, exposing her neck. He was about to be cleansed—he was about to watch the Death Dance.

"Happy Halloween Stacey," he whispered in her ear.

His eyes lit up like wildfire...



# The Bridge

Michael West

**Kim Saunders chewed her lower lip**, trying not to let this little field trip bother her. She sat in the passenger's seat, dressed as Little Red Riding Hood with a small wicker basket resting in her lap. Angela Peter's party had been totally lame. Bobbing for apples? Did she think they were all still in the fifth grade? Carter Donovan, her boyfriend, drove—his face painted like Brandon Lee's *The Crow*. He was a wide receiver on the football team, two years her senior, and incredibly gorgeous even in ghoulish make-up. She would've gone anywhere he asked her to. And it wasn't like they were going alone. There were Tony and Tina, Mark and Ellen...three couples crammed into an old station wagon on a dark country road. Safety in numbers, right? There was nothing to be nervous

## Michael West

about. Nothing. After all, there were no such things as ghosts...even on Halloween.

As Edna Collings Bridge drew nearer, she found her heart thudding louder in her ears. “Old” places bothered her. It wasn’t that she found them creepy, although she did. If she spent enough time in some buildings, she got physically ill—headaches, nausea, chills. There were even older portions of the school that made her head spin. The doctor chalked it up to a simple mold allergy or mild asthma.

These breathing problems had made her mother overprotective to the point of smothering. The woman would go crazy whenever Kim got a simple bruise or scrape. More recently, they nearly came to blows over the issue of Kim’s driver’s license. Her Driver’s Ed instructor granted her a waiver, but dear old Mom said she needed more practice. At last her father—

*The voice of reason!*

—stepped in to say she’d earned the right to take the test.

“Amy, just because she has a license doesn’t mean she can take off whenever she wants,” he said, then reminded her, “We still hold the car keys.”

Her mother gave him that scolding glare of hers—the one that said, “You always give in to her”—but she finally agreed to let Kim take the test.

*Which I passed, thank you very much!*

And what would Mom think of this late night ride to the middle of nowhere?

*She wouldn’t like it at all,* Kim thought with a smile. *Which is all the more reason to do it.*

The car entered the gaping maw of the elderly covered bridge. Faint light from the dashboard was all that stood between them and total darkness. Carter drove to the middle of the overpass and stopped.

“Turn off the motor,” Mark called from the back seat, his voice filtered through the hockey mask he wore. “You gotta turn off the motor.”

Carter nodded and pulled back on the key. The engine coughed several times, then died. After a moment of uneasy silence, he gave Kim a wink, and she smiled in spite of her fears. Slowly, he turned to face the back seat. His letterman jacket made an odd creaking sound. “Has everyone heard the story?” he asked.

Tony pulled off his ninja hood and grabbed Tina by the shoulders. “She hasn’t.”

The Hershey’s flag from Tina’s silver kiss costume slapped him

## The Bridge

across his face. "It's bullshit, whatever it is."

"We'll see, won't we?" Carter grinned—a gothic clown with a campfire story for the kiddies. "Back in the 20's there was this family who would come here for picnics along the stream that runs right under this bridge. They would eat and lounge around, the father would fish, and the little girl would swim in the stream. When it started to get dark, the parents would drive into this covered bridge, turn off their motor, and honk three times. That was the signal for the little girl that it was time to go home.

One day, when they honked their horn, the girl didn't come. They looked everywhere for her and, finally, they found her body. She'd drowned." He paused for effect, his eyes spanning each of their faces before continuing. "They say that if you drive into this bridge at night, turn off your motor, and honk your horn three times—"

Mark cut him off, "I thought it was five times?"

"That's *Candyman*," Ellen corrected with a nervous giggle. Kim couldn't believe her mother let her walk out of the house in that dominatrix outfit.

Carter went on. "You honk your horn three times, just like her parents did. If you do that...the ghost of that drowned little girl will come get in the car, ready to go home with you."

There was another brief silence, broken by Mark's mock moaning. Ellen elbowed him and Tony laughed.

"Shut-up everyone." Carter placed his hand above the steering wheel, ready to smack the horn. "You guys ready?"

They nodded.

He hit the horn...once...twice...three times.

Kim looked around nervously. She felt something brush her leg and stiffened in her seat. Thankfully, she didn't shriek. When she looked down, she could barely make out Carter's hand in the darkness—stroking her thigh.

"How long is it supposed to take?" Tina asked.

Tony put a finger to her mouth. "Shhh! You'll scare away the ghost."

There was something coming toward them—a dark shadow blotting out the square of moonlit road on the opposite end of the bridge. Whatever it was, it had wings. Before Kim could say a word, the form collided with the windshield.

The girls screamed at the loud thud.

"What the hell was that?" Tony wanted to know.

"It was a bird," Carter told them, his hand left Kim's thigh—feeling the glass where the animal impacted. "Damn thing smacked right into

us.”

“It wasn’t a bird,” Kim told him, clutching the handle of her basket. “It was a bat.”

He shrugged. “Maybe. This place *is* old and in the woods.”

“And haunted,” Mark added with a nervous giggle, puffs of breath rising like smoke signals from his lips.

“Don’t bats have radar or something?” Ellen asked, and then shuddered. “Start the motor again, I’m freezing.”

“We can’t,” Tony huffed. “The ghost won’t show if the car’s running.”

“The ghost isn’t gonna show anyway,” Tina assured him, “because there’s no ghost.”

Behind Kim’s head, the passenger window shattered. An ice storm of glass blew inward, stinging the bare skin of her right arm and leg. Her hair broke free of her hood, blowing across her face like a tattered shroud. Between the strands she saw a figure step from the shadows. It moved closer to her door—a little girl with a blue, wrinkled face, sunken eyes, and green hair matted with sediment.

“I’m ready to go,” the dead thing said, its voice no louder than a whisper. “Ready to go home.”

It reached into the car and grabbed Kim by the arm. Its flesh was soft and horribly spongy. She screamed until she thought her throat would rupture, until the sound began to unravel into a hoarse whining. Carter turned on the engine and slammed his foot on the gas. As the car lurched forward, the little girl’s wet grip slipped from Kim’s wrist.

When they cleared the bridge, Kim slid across the seat, stray slivers of grass carving into her legs. She was still trying to scream as she climbed into Carter’s lap. The car stopped quickly, a cloud of dust rising from the road, and he tried to find out if she was okay. For what seemed like an eternity, she couldn’t speak. Finally, she told him, “It touched me! It touched my arm!”

Carter Donovan had not seen the dead girl. None of them had. They thought another bat had flown at the station wagon, thought it had brushed against Kim before retreating into the dark. She never told them what really happened. Insurance paid for new glass, Band-Aids covered the cuts she received from the broken shards, but nothing could fix her shattered sense of reality, and nothing could cure her newfound fear of the dark.



# Sweet Tooth

Richard Pitaniello

**The wind howled in its softest voice**, and the faraway rumble of thunder snored. A thin sheet of fog had fallen over the town, and the gray sky faded dark on that Halloween night. Dozens of porch lights flickered on, and trick-or-treaters flew towards them like ships to a siren's wail. Their laughter and shrieks soared up to the charcoal clouds.

Two children ran up a driveway filled with plum-sized gravel. Instead of asking for candy from the skeleton on the porch guarding the bowl, they walked into the house—"Your mom isn't home, is she?"—and emptied their bags. The sweets rained thickly on the hardwood floor and hissed as the boys pushed them back and forth, sorting them.

"Damn popcorn!" Mitch fumed. "Mom will make me throw it away when she gets home."

## Richard Pitaniello

"Anything good in there?" Dale asked.

Mitch gestured towards a pile of chocolate bars he had just organized.

"Why the hell do you alphabetize your Halloween candy?" Dale asked.

"Saves time."

"It *wastes* time," Dale said flatly. "Why don't you count them like you always do. At least that's useful."

Mitch did a quick count. "We each get 5," he said.

Dale filled his mouth with chocolate, then said: "The decorations this year rocked. Remember Dr. Burch's house?"

"Yeah," Mitch told him. "I loved the dummy he stabbed with all those scalpels! I almost stole one for myself."

"I wouldn't want to get my fingerprints on them," Dale said. "You never want your prints on anything with blades when the police come knocking."

"You stole that silvery thing from Dr. Weber's house," Mitch pointed out.

"Those were *dental pliers*, not knives," Dale said. "The scalpel body was great decor though. So was that other house with the body hanging from a tree."

"By its own entrails! That was great. Hey, what are you doing?" Mitch asked.

Dale had taken the stolen pliers from his pocket and crunched a hard candy into sand. He shrugged and said, "I don't want to break my teeth on these damn things. That happens sometimes." He smiled and licked the powdered candy off the pliers. He frowned. "Yek! Tastes weird. I'll have to wash these things off before I can use them." He dropped the pliers that were freckled with fake blood onto the floor and stared at Mitch for a second. Then he asked, "What's that you got there?"

"I don't know," Mitch responded, holding up a very small brown bag. "I'll probably have to throw it out. Looks like someone's handing out homemade candy again. My parents *hate* that. They keep talking about poison and razorblade shards." He paused. "Why's the bag made of leather?"

"Hell if I know," Dale said. "Where did you get it?"

"Dr. Weber's house," Mitch said quickly. "He insisted on giving me this, even though I asked him for something mom won't make me throw away. He just smiled and held up that stupid, bloody skull of his...telling me he'd 'make me candy just like the other kids' if I came inside. Then he pointed to the bookshelf full of little skulls behind him. What a creep!"

## Sweet Tooth

“ ‘Come inside?’ He asked you to come inside?” Dale chuckled. “Maybe we should call the cops and report him.”

“Maybe,” Mitch agreed. “Don’t know what this is though. Maybe gum drops.” He snickered. “But why a dentist like him would hand out *candy*?”

“You should have asked him for that skull,” Dale said. “It looked real. What was he supposed to be dressed like anyway?”

“I’m not sure. He painted up his teeth to look like candy corn and traced over his veins so they looked black—like licorice!” he said. “I guess they went with his candy teeth. I saw some kid walking around with painted teeth and black veins too....And Dr. Weber also said that he had replaced his skull with one made of sugar. He must have been holding his *real* skull then.” Mitch laughed. “He said he wanted to ‘make me candy.’ Maybe he was making himself and other kids into candy demons!”

“But what’s in the bag?”

“How should I know?”

“Open it,” Dale goaded.

The bag was sealed with a short piece of twine, which Mitch had to use his teeth to untie. The top of the pouch drooped open and Mitch held it up to the light. It looked full of broken candy corn. Mitch smiled and upended the bag. The contents clattered like hailstones. Dale grabbed a handful, but dropped them, letting out a short gasp.

His hand dripped red, yet it wasn’t cut. Both boys stared down at the candy that wasn’t really candy, but yellow bone licked in blood.

Mitch quickly counted. “We each get 16,” he said reflexively. They stared at each other as flashing blue lights began popping outside their window and somebody knocked at the door.





# Halloween Picnic

Tim Clifton

**“You ready, Hon? What are you thinking about?”** Miriam asked me, stroking my hair.

I gazed through the picture window into the front yard. We’d outdone the Halloween decorations this year; the yard was covered in white, black, and orange. And we weren’t done yet. “Nothing,” I said, lightly squeezing her hand.

“Ready?”

## Tim Clifton

I nodded. Halloween Picnic.

Southern California has seasons, you know.

Some people joke about it. Miss a week and you'll miss fall, they'll say. Hah-Hah. People have tricked themselves that this benevolent climate protects people from the rhythm of the world, from the laws of nature. As if strong sunlight and seventy- degree weather inoculates this place from bad things.

Anyway, it's a theory I have.

You just can't look away too long before it happens, that's all. Trees do lose their leaves, the weather downshifts into overcast and rain with some regularity in the last quarter of the year. The air mists and swirls and you can taste eucalyptus leaves on your tongue. True rainstorms, not the cloudbursts that playfully dot the ground, wash all the accumulated crap into the drains on its long ride to the open ocean. It's here, the change is here, subtle as a breeze, but here, make no mistake.

"Ron?" she asked.

"Nothing," I cut her off as I pulled her to me, kissing her lips and mane of graying hair. She got what people call the "winter blues" during the later part of the year. The doctor prescribed her an unpronounceable medication with a lot of "z's" and "y's" in the name.

Miriam was my age almost to the day, and we had enjoyed a lot of great years here, but also our allotment of sorrow. Her depression. My infidelity.

"Let's go," I said, wrapping my arm around her waist.

She already had the picnic basket in hand, neatly stacked with sandwiches, dessert, and soda. I stuffed plates and cutlery, a squat boom box, CD's, and a large sturdy black plastic bag into a backpack and maneuvered it onto my back. I opened the French doors to the rear patio and motioned for her to go first. Miriam smiled and walked ahead of me.

She stopped at the end of the yard by the chain link fence and looked down into the canyon. She turned to me. "A wonderful day for a picnic."

I smiled and hefted the backpack.

The grade was steep. We went down through the thickets of chaparral and massive trees with wide muscular limbs that made unexpected elbow turns. Unseen animals made explosive dashes through the thicket as we tramped through. We laughed at our awkwardness, sliding, complaining and giggling about our arthritis and general lack of coordination as we went.

We reached the bottom. Here the air became humid, the mist collected on the bark and moss sprouted on the north side of trees. We settled down in the clearing flanked by a stream and surrounded with massive oak trees.

## Halloween Picnic

I have another theory.

There are little pockets of nature where the seasons are felt more deeply, and are grabbed onto with a tenacious grasp and nurtured. Under the shelter of trees wetness gathered and collected. The roots glistened, and the ugly bumps looked like knuckles on a frozen monster. The multiple complex branches sweated and the wetness beaded into regular sized circles that jiggled in the breeze.

We had our Halloween picnic here every year.

We held each other and she took in the quiet glade. "This is the last time I'll be here," she said.

I shushed her and turned on the boom box. We listened to Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, and Billie Holiday even though we were baby boomers. We slow danced, careful to avoid stubbing our toes on the gnarled roots. We grew closer and I looked deep into her blue eyes. The broad daylight that flooded the glen dimmed, as if the aperture on a camera had been turned down as we looked into each other's eyes. I kissed her and we settled into the blanket and cuddled. We gazed into the sky. A red tailed hawk made a slow lazy turn and banked off on an updraft.

"I want to be buried here," she whispered.

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"No."

She turned to me and propped herself up on one elbow. "This is where true autumn, the oak trees shed their leaves and it's a blanket of a million pieces you can roll in. A resting place built on memories. Promise me."

I gently squeezed her hand. "I promise."

"This place is special. Why be buried in some place that I don't even know, that I have no connection to?"

"And who ensures that *I* get buried here?"

She laughed and placed her right hand over my heart and smiled. Thin wrinkles spread across her face. "We're already together. Cremate my ass and bury me here. Or scatter me in the stream."

I picked up a pebble and side armed it into the water. It sank immediately with a heavy plunk. "You have time left."

She shook her head. "Sure, just less than most people, especially you. This is my last Halloween. We both know that. So bury me here, like the best husband you've always been."

"I'm not the best husband..." I started.

"Every best husband has been forgiven for something by their wife. In your case, multiple things."

## Tim Clifton

"Let's eat."

"Good, change the subject already."

"It just sounds like you're giving up."

"You mean by saying I don't have much time left you think I'm giving up on you, right?" She opened the basket and laid out a checkered plastic picnic covering. I placed heavy flat rocks on the corners to hold it in place. Miriam pulled out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a dozen orange cookies of pumpkin faces. Candy corn for desert (like we needed that). We drank soda and watched the oily stream run its course.

I scanned the glen. Where the hell would I scatter her ashes?

"Under the biggest oak," she said to me as if I'd asked my question out loud. She nudged me. "You've always been such a planner."

"I don't like this." My voice was lost in the thicket and trees.

I went about my chores to change the subject, pulling out the black plastic bag and gathering handfuls of crinkly multicolored leaves and shoving them inside.

She started helping me and said: "It's the pain, Ron. You understand? There are days..."

I rubbed the back of her neck. "I never did enough for you. Now time's caught up with us."

"You always thought that. Regrets, regrets, regrets. The one thing about you I never liked." She kissed me on the cheek and looked into the bag. "Perfect, we'll make a bed of leaves in front of the haystack and save some to burn. Nothing like the smell of burning leaves on Halloween, it's like incense." She gathered in the checkered tablecloth, wiping off the wet spots from the damp ground and carefully brushed off the leaves and twigs that seemed drawn to it like a magnet.

I took one last look at the glade as a lone cloud weakened the sun's light, shadows shifted across the high grass like black smoke. I hefted the backpack, not wanting to think about what the next trip would be like.

In the early afternoon I began carving the pumpkins. Jack 'o lanterns are usually played as jokes, amusing approximations of the human head like a clown. No goofy square toothed creations for me, no. Jagged lines, sharp teeth, penetrating eyes, fierce noses, pumpkins with an edge.

I worked on one pumpkin modeled after Edvard Munch's *The Scream* with hallowed cheeks and hands carved out to approximate the pose in the painting. A perfect circular hole for the mouth, staring eyes. I'd place it in front of red background that would approximate the sky depicted in the painting, not that anyone would get it. Except Miriam.

"You're sick," Miriam commented, marveling at my work.

"What are you wearing?"

"I'll be back in a few minutes and show you."

## Halloween Picnic

I worked on the second pumpkin; this one had faces on both sides, both with jagged slashes for mouths and angled eyes. I would call it my Janus Pumpkin.

“Yoo hoo.” Miriam called out.

Miriam was dressed as a witch with diaphanous black veils. I put down my knife and walked over and kissed her. Jasmine filled the air. “Is witch horny?” I asked.

She moved toward me and bit my lower lip. “Later baby.”

“You put a spell on me.”

She poked me. “What a line that is.”

I returned to my pumpkin while she baked pumpkin pies, and not just one or two, but a half dozen decorated with white ghosts and black goblins and put them on the window shelf to cool.

“We going to make it 11 in a row?” I asked.

“Of course,” she replied. “With those pumpkins you’re carving? We got it in the bag.”

We had won best-decorated house in the neighborhood ten years running, thank you. At one time or another we’ve had fake graveyards, denuded trees with cute hanging men, cauldrons bubbling with dry ice, black lights that illuminated glow in the dark skeletons. Thick candles would soon burn in the caverns of my pumpkin masterpieces, wafting burnt sweetness. Halloween was the closest thing to a religious holiday for us.

By five the neighborhood kicked into full swing, families assembled and carefully counted their numbers as the sun illuminated a scrim of clouds on the horizon in red and orange. Excited kids started walking, unsure of where to go, tiny legs clumping on the sidewalk as they ran to the next house ahead of their doting parents. Older brothers and sisters held the hands of the really little ones dressed as ghosts, goblins and cows, walking down the street in a loose chain. They wanted to come to our house first. Of course, we gave them a wonderful incentive. Treats with a capital T. Extra large big slabs of chocolate, peanut butter, and crisp cookie treats. We didn’t give out bite sized candies. No sir. We got the big ones, the 20 ounce size and up and watched as the little faces expanded with delight behind tiny plastic masks. And if they wanted a slice of that pumpkin pie and drink purple and red fizzing juice sitting on the card table in the front yard until they puked, they were more than welcome.

The candlelight softened Miriam’s features and wrinkles and her slight smile made her look younger and happier. She gave out the treats, tweaking tiny noses and gushing at the tiny costumes and excited voices.

## Tim Clifton

She watched the pint sized ghouls and goblins depart down the street with their bags and tiny plastic jack o lanterns for the last time.

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The funeral was attended by nine people and I wallowed in the sadness of the unsaid things to her and regrets that filled my brain. Of course, Miriam would have admonished such thoughts.

A nondenominational minister droned on about cosmic importance and peace over the bronze angular urn containing Miriam's ashes. I spied Judith, Miriam's sister, and nodded to her. I shook hands dutifully after the ceremony, not looking anyone in the eye, thanking people for coming and not listening to their reply. Judith favored Miriam in certain ways, particularly if you focused on the dark eyes, which I now avoided. Her hair color was dark and cut short. Five years Miriam's junior, they were cordial but not very close...Miriam never talked about it. Why didn't I bother to ask? Judith separated herself from her husband and small girl and hugged me.

"Thank you," I said.

Her face cracked. "She was so sick Ron."

"She gave a good fight Judith. Just got so tired. That's what she kept telling me."

She nodded. "You were a good husband to her. She always said to me how lucky she was."

I never knew that. "I was the lucky one."

\*\*\*

One day in January the time was right. Dark clouds filled the sky and the air became humid.

I packed the urn and a collapsible shovel into my backpack and reached the clearing by the stream at sunset, as deer and coyote ventured out. I placed the urn against the largest oak tree. The tree's massive girth held knots of tough wood and pockmarked holes. I dug with the shovel and hit rocks and stubborn roots. The blade chipped. I pulled out slime-covered chunks of earth that were thick with worm trails and dropped them into the river.

I jumped at a soft thump and looked over. The urn had fallen over and ashes spilled onto the ground.

"I'm sorry Miriam." I thought: *It's just her ashes.*

## Halloween Picnic

I opened the urn and shook out half the ashes into the hole and covered it up. I spread it out with my hands and moved leaves over the spot.

I scattered the rest into the stream saying, "It's not the same without you Miriam. I love you."

Exhausted, I hiked back to the top and showered, watching the black dirt snake down the drain. I slept hard and dreamed of dark weather and gaping pumpkin grins spitting blackened rocks.

\*\*\*

I visited the grave once a week, leaving flowers and talked to the ground and the stream. I played Ella, Duke, and Billie to reminisce. The gentle, just noticeable seasons came and went, the brief winter rains that soaked the dry land and eucalyptus trees, the spring gloom that lasted just long enough to bring you down, and the finally the perfect sunny blue brilliance of a long summer. The sun filled days came and went, and the next year rolled around and the weather changed subtly again in the fall.

I took a leave of absence from work that was permanent.

The Halloween contest. I put out plastic RIP tombstones, stacks of hay with pumpkins sitting on top in the front yard. I leaned corn stalks with multicolored kernels against the house. A scarecrow with straw flowing out of its arms and legs

The weather cooperated. Gray skies made the lighted red, orange, and white decorations stand out. Soon kids would stumble out onto the streets with urgency, some for the first time, others I had last seen a year ago who were a little less into it, and still others who had gotten over it completely and I would never see again. I hadn't carved a pumpkin. I picked one off the haystack in the front yard and dropped it onto the kitchen table. I started cutting with no idea of what I was creating. Orange goop covered the blade.

I looked out the rear picture window and saw movement at the back of the yard as twilight settled in.

A swarm of bees flying up out of the canyon? But the shapeless cloud against the darkening sky stayed cohesive and slowly moved into the backyard and towards the French doors.

She wasn't an apparition, not some kind of freakish decomposing figure with tattered rags for clothes. No, it was on the updraft of the wind from the canyon, like the soft breathing of a sleeping giant. I smelled her perfume and that whiff of jasmine she so loved.

## Tim Clifton

The French doors facing the patio opened slowly, the curtains fluttered in a lazy wave as the doors swung back on their hinges. The cloud moved to the ceiling and stopped. She was here to enjoy another Halloween with me. But it would never be the same would it? Things change, the seasons roll around and eventually I too will no longer be here to enjoy Halloween.

The cloud nodded in agreement with me.

I dropped the pumpkin and it shattered, membranes of thick shapeless orange filling laced with seeds spilled onto the floor.

The doorbell rang and I greeted the first wave of kids as Miriam watched. I gave out generous treats and one child, dressed as a Green Martian with a slit mouth and exaggerated eyes paused on the doorstep. "Where is she?" the little girl asked.

"Excuse me?" I asked, leaning down to her.

"The woman that lives here. She's cool."

"Oh. Well, she couldn't make it this year. She's sick."

"Hope she's better..."

A tall woman scooped up the girl and turned to me. "I'm sorry," the woman said.

"It's OK."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

I couldn't remember her name. "I appreciate that. Thanks."

I closed the door and turned to the cloud. "Everyone misses you."

The cloud nodded again.

The doorbell rang. I turned back to the cloud. "Maybe it's a girl in a tutu this time, I know you always loved those costumes."

I opened the door. It was Judith. We exchanged a hug.

"Judith, what are you..."

She began, "Are you OK?"

"Sure," I said. I looked above the French doors. Miriam waited there, watching us.

Judith looked around the house. "You've really gone all out this year. As usual."

I grinned. "We both have."

"It's been ten months. I know you took early retirement. Nobody's heard from you. We're worried."

"I know," I said defensively.

"I sent you emails, voicemails. I've come by, you didn't answer the door."

"Only on Halloween."

"You don't grieve alone."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

## Halloween Picnic

She suppressed a laugh. "Are you kidding me? I don't have a spiritual bone in my body."

"I was Catholic you know, when I was growing up. That stuff sticks to you, got to be worth a couple bones, a rib or two."

She shook her head. "I've never heard you talk about religion. I mean, you're grieving, I guess it's understandable."

"But I swear she's here, she really is."

"In your memory. In your wonderful memory." She touched my cheek with her hand.

"Don't you smell her perfume? The Jasmine?"

She sniffed the air and shook her head. "No."

I pointed to the stationary cloud above the French doors. "See that?"

"What, the crack in the ceiling?"

"The cloud."

"What?"

The doorbell rang again, I dumped candy into the bags of a girl in a pink tutu and two boys dressed as ghouls without saying trick or treat. I looked over my shoulder at the dark cloud. "She can't be gone. Judith. She can't be gone."

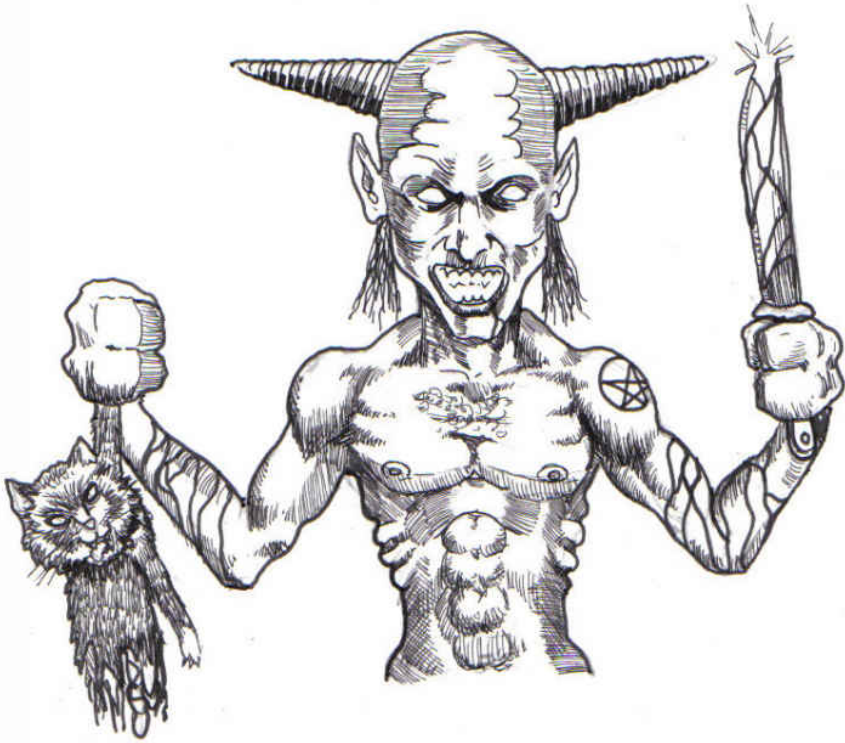
Judith hugged me. "You've got to let her go."

It hit me that she was gone. Over Judith's shoulder I watched as the cloud lifted and dissolved before my eyes. I erupted into a loud sob.

I'm insane.

It's a theory I have.





# Halloween Fright

Keith Gouveia

**Derek Coon sat at the back of his classroom**, angry and disappointed.

Though today was his favorite time of year, the morbid cadence of the pelting rain told him tonight would bring him no bounty of sweets.

He sat there, sulking and drawing a doodle of the most frightening image his twelve-year-old mind could muster as his classmates, one by one, stood before the class telling their favorite Halloween tale. Averting his attention from the drawing only to see who was going to be next, he didn't feel the slightest bit guilty for not showing the same respect they showed him as he spun his devilish tale of woe. After all, it wasn't his fault their uninteresting stories were filled with cliché after cliché. Why should he waste his time with their unimaginative drivel?

He spent a month working on his tale of terror. It was an intricate

## Keith Gouveia

plot that he was quite proud of crafting. How a bitter man dressed up as Cousin It from the *Addams Family* and crashed a Halloween party. Pretending to be the host in disguise, he was able to slaughter the kids who tormented him about his miniature status.

All that time, all that effort just to receive his teacher's scornful eye and the bewildered looks of his peers.

*What was the point? Stupid jerks,* he thought.

Peering out the window behind him and seeing no end to the gray clouds covering the heavens, Derek felt all hope of having an exciting adventure that night wash away. His eyes trailed from the window over to the front of the classroom. Glancing at Glen Finch, his upper lip curled in disgust.

"I hope your party sucks," he mumbled under his breath. Feeling bitter for not being invited to the only worthy alternative to trick or treating.

A heavy sigh escaped his lips just as his friend Mike stood and approached the front of the class.

"Today I'll be reading a poem my grandfather gave me. It's called *A Long Night*. I hope you enjoy it," he said, catching Derek's full attention.

He listened carefully as Mike read the poem aloud.

"Halloween is a frightful time of year  
When ghouls and goblins deliver fear.  
They make their appearance when the sun sets  
So you better heed their idle threats.

The carnage they create is so severe  
They will kill everyone you hold dear.  
Human blood will flow freely through the street  
As they search houses for tender meat.

These vile creatures are a deadly brood  
That will put you in the foulest mood.  
Children provide the most favorite treat  
For these ghouls and goblins you will meet.

Arm yourself with whatever you can find  
But be careful not to lose your mind.  
In the basement or closet you must hide  
And hang on for the hellacious ride.

Though you have lost your family and friend

## Halloween Fright

The night has yet to come to an end.  
Hold your emotions, not yet time to mourn  
Save those feelings ‘til the rising dawn.”

With the closing stanza, the classroom erupted in applause.

Derek watched as a wide smile stretched across Mike’s face. As he joined in the clapping, his demeanor changed for the better. Just from hearing the simple rhyme.

“Not bad, Michael,” Mrs. Soars said as he took his seat. “It pleases me to see you all enjoyed the poem. It’s good to broaden your horizons by sampling all forms of literature. However, the poem has its flaws. The beat and rhythm are a little off. That is the trouble with rhyming poems; they are difficult and tricky. It’s simply not enough to rhyme; the syllables must be consistent. Though one could argue by placing the poem under the vast umbrella of *free prose* one could avoid the razor’s edge of the critics, but where do you draw the line between well written poetry and poetry just for fun...blah...blah...blah.”

Blocking out her whiny voice, Derek returned to his doodle. *She always finds a way to turn something fun into a lecture*, he thought as he scribbled some strands of hair on top of the corpse’s rotting head. The little enjoyment he received from the poem was now raped from him by her incessant need to criticize.

*Why do adults put down everything we enjoy?*

The ringing of the bell signaled the end of the school day and silenced Mrs. Soars.

As Derek stood from his desk, he noticed Elizabeth Birch sulking. Obviously disappointed Mrs. Soars had stolen her chance to shine, leaving her the only one who did not get to read.

“I’m sorry, Liz,” he said as he passed her.

“I’ll just save it for tonight,” she said defiantly.

“Then there’s another reason why I wish I was going,” he replied softly, his head hung low in defeat.

Approaching his locker, he noticed Glen talking with a few of his friends and decided it was time to beg.

“Hey Glen, what’s up?” he asked cheerfully.

“Not much,” he replied.

The other three boys just looked at him in disgust.

“I was hoping to change your mind about inviting me to your party tonight.”

“Yeah—about that. Look—I don’t like you. No one likes you. You’re creepy and I want this to be the best party ever, so the answer is still no.”

## Keith Gouveia

"I like him," Mike said, coming to Derek's defense as he approached.

"Big deal. One out of fifty who will be partying tonight," one of the other boys said.

"No—wait. I'll tell ya what. You come dressed as a girl tonight and I'll let you in."

Glen's friends burst into a fit of laughter. Derek could only guess it was because of the image instilled in their perverted little minds.

"Don't do it," Mike quickly replied.

Derek turned and peered through the window to his left. The sky was still black and water ran freely down the glass. "It's all right. I got no problem with that."

"Hopefully, your costume will allow everyone to forget about that twisted story you told. You're sick, you know that?" Glen said, nudging his shoulder into Derek as he walked past him.

"Yeah, I know. Don't worry, I'll behave," he called after them.

"They're only going to poke fun at you. You know that. Why are you going to go?"

"What else am I going to do? Look outside."

"Ya, I know. Shitty isn't it."

"Yeah. But if you don't go, maybe we could—"

"Are you kidding? I'm going. No way I'm missing this."

"Then neither am I."

"Wouldn't it be great if the ghouls and goblins were real and they came to the party? I'd pay money to see them eat Glen."

Derek half-laughed. "Tell me about that poem. Who wrote it? Is it authentic?"

"I don't know who wrote it, but my grandpa was really trying his best to scare me with it."

"He thinks it's real?"

"I don't know about that. He was just being lame."

"Maybe, but it sounds like whoever wrote it knew what they were talking about."

"Who knows? You ready to go?"

"Ready," Derek replied and the two headed home.

When they reached Derek's house, the two said their goodbye's and agreed to walk to Glen's house together to avoid an embarrassing parental drop off, whether it was raining or not. Glen lived a mere two blocks away from Mike's house, which was only four houses down from Derek's.

During the time the two separated up until they reunited, Derek's mind continuously recited the poem and each time he heard it, he put a

## Halloween Fright

little more faith into it.

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Arriving at the party in their costumes, both Derek and Mike mingled amongst their classmates. The lights were dim, the music was pumping, and the guests were having a hell of a time.

While Derek danced with a young vampiress, he felt a tap on his right shoulder. He turned around to see Glen's devilish grin.

"No, that's not your date. This is," he said, stepping to the side.

As he did so, Derek could see one of Glen's lackeys holding back Glen's Rottweiler. Before he could react, they released the dog. It charged toward him, barking and snarling with strands of saliva splashing several spectators.

Derek screamed like the girl he was dressed as when the dog's muscular body slammed into him, knocking them both to the ground.

As Derek tried to stand, the dog voraciously air humped him. Everyone laughed as the dog's pelvis thrust back and forth to the rhythm of its grunts.

When he tried to push the large dog away, Derek felt a warm trickle run down his legs. "Son of a bitch!"

"How was that golden shower?" Glen asked before bursting into a fit of laughter.

"Asshole!" Derek shouted as he stood.

In one quick, fluid motion, his right fist skyrocketed toward Glen's jaw. With his eyes closed in the midst of laughter, Glen failed to see the imminent threat.

Derek landed the right hook flush on Glen's jaw sending the boy's body crashing into his two lackeys, knocking them all to the ground.

The dog growled, and Derek kicked it in the head.

It ran off whimpering.

He didn't wait around for retaliation; Derek ran to the front door and left without looking back. He ran into the dark night, tears of anger running down his face.

He ran until he couldn't go any further. Leaning over and placing his hands on his knees, his breathing became a high-pitched whine as his asthma squeezed his lungs tightly.

Hearing a rustle in the nearby brush, Derek called out, "Who's there?" When no answer came, he changed tactics. "Come out or else!"

Nothing came.

As he continued home, he couldn't shake the feeling of being followed. Every now and then, he spun around, expecting someone to be

behind him.

When he reached his home, he bypassed his parents and went straight upstairs to his room, shutting the door behind him.

\*\*\*

Sometime in the middle of the night, Derek woke to a peculiar scratching noise. Sitting up in bed, he rubbed his eyes, trying to stimulate the adjustment. Peering through the darkness, he saw nothing.

Then he heard it again, the sound coming from the only window in his room.

Swinging his legs off the edge of the bed, he walked to it. Without hesitation, he unlocked and opened the window, sticking his head out while doing so.

His eyes first scanned the sides of the house, then the front yard. Finding nothing, he closed the window and walked back to his bed. Just as he was about to climb in, he heard the unmistakable sound of chewing.

“Mom...Dad,” he called, but to no response.

Walking out into the hallway and peering to his left, he noticed his parents’ door ajar, which he found odd because of his mother’s habit of sleeping topless.

He crept down the hall and when he was at the threshold of his parents’ bedroom, the chewing stopped.

Feeling the right side of the wall for the light switch, he flicked it and gasped. His body froze in fear as he stared wide-eyed at the horror before him.

Three creatures covered in greenish-blue scales gorged themselves on his parents’ carcasses. Blood adorned every wall as the creatures rummaged through their innards, searching for their favorite parts.

“You can’t be real,” he said, still unable to move.

One of the creatures jumped down from the bed and hissed at him. Though the creature stood no taller than he did, Derek’s body was locked in fear’s icy grip.

The creature stepped toward him, threatening him as it approached by menacingly slashing the air in front of it.

It stood before him, eyeing him. Its snout-like nose twitching as it sniffed his aura, then its floppy ears perked up as it tilted its head to the right. For a moment, Derek’s body relaxed as he thought the creature was just as curious about him as he was they, but without warning, it slashed his chest.

“Ow!” he shouted, clutching the wound.

## Halloween Fright

“Does that feel real?” it hissed as it spoke.

The fetid stench of death caused bile to stir at the back of Derek’s throat. Swallowing, he said, “You can speak?”

“We can do whatever you believe we can,” it replied.

Another creature jumped from the bed and tackled its brethren. They rolled across the floor and all Derek could do was watch as his knees trembled in fear.

“You’re divulging too much information,” said the attacker.

The third creature slouched over and bared its jagged, bloodstained teeth. “You should run.”

Taking its advice, Derek turned tail and ran to the garage.

He needed a weapon.

Inside the garage resided a plethora of tools, from his mother’s gardening tools to his father’s carpentry equipment. Each choice before him was capable of inflicting a sudden death to the marauding beasts. As he walked to the far side of the garage, one of the creatures dropped from the ceiling, knocking him to the ground.

Derek struggled with the beast and easily got the upper hand.

Grabbing it by the wrists, he tossed it against the wall and grabbed the closest weapon he could find—his mother’s garden fork.

After shaking its head from the impact, it lunged forward with its claws out in front of it, ready to slice his tender flesh, but Derek stood his ground.

When it was in range, he slammed the prongs of the fork into the creature’s head—lodging it in its forehead.

It grunted as the steel penetrated its brain.

Derek watched with glee as its eyes rolled into the back of its head and its lifeless body fell over backwards.

Placing his foot under the creature’s chin for leverage, he pulled the garden fork out with all his might, giving a grunt as he accomplished the task. Hustling out of the garage, he ran into the kitchen.

As he came upon the basement door, he could hear their insidious laughter. Slamming the door behind him, he bolted it and descended the stairs. His whimpers echoing in the dark, dingy basement, causing him shame.

“Mom...Dad...I’m so sorry.”

The door rattled as the creatures tried to break through.

“Leave me alone!” he shouted, wiping away his tears. “Just go away!”

Silence.

Derek’s eyes scanned the perimeter; the only light was the little moonlight filtering in from the tiny window.

## Keith Gouveia

"They can't all be bad. There has to be some that are good. One that would be willing to help me."

A soft cry broke the silence.

"Who's there?"

"Don't hurt me. I mean you no harm," said one of the creatures as it stepped out of the shadows. The creature's eyes were wide open with pools of tears, its hands clasped together in front of its chest, and its back was slouched as it walked toward him.

"What do you want?" he asked, holding the fork out in front of him.

"Only to help. They won't kill you."

"Could have fooled me."

"It's true. You're the reason we are here."

"What?"

"It was your faith that broke down the walls of reality. Because you believed we existed."

"So this is all my fault?"

"No...not your fault."

"How is this possible?" he asked, lowering the weapon.

"It is All Hallow's Eve—anything is possible if you believe."

"If I stopped believing, then would you all disappear?"

"No. If you stop believing," the creature paused, "they will surely kill you."

"But—"

"One of my brethren went to Glen's party and slaughtered those boys who teased you," the goblin said, cutting him off. "Just as you wished."

"No." The weight of his guilt fell upon him. *How many lives were lost because of me?*

"Afraid so. Many children were spared so that they too would believe, securing our freedom next year, and if you stop believing, they will have no use for you."

"You mean after tonight, you'll vanish."

"Yes. It's best you stay here in case they sense your betrayal."

"Okay," was all he could say. He sat down at his father's desk, crossed his arms, and rested his head.

"I'm sorry this has happened," said the creature.

"Thank you. So there are some of you that are good?"

"We are whatever you believe we are, but now it's more complicated than that because of the other children. They now have their own beliefs of what happened tonight, some far from the truth, and I'm afraid something far more terrible than I may be born next year."

"I can't think about that right now. I can fix this in the morning. I'll explain to everyone what you've told me, and hopefully, next year all of

## Halloween Fright

you will be good.”

“That’s a good plan. You should get some rest. I’ll keep watch for you.”

“Thank you,” Derek said and before long, he drifted off to sleep.

\*\*\*

In the morning, Derek awoke to the sound of the door crashing in.

As he jolted up, he looked around for his friend, but found no sign of him. A look of puzzlement adorned his face as two police officers ran down the stairs, their guns trained on him.

“Don’t move. Hands above your head,” one of them ordered.

“Thank, God, you’re here. My mom and dad—”

“Save it kid,” the officer said while the other officer reached for his handcuffs.

“What’s going on?” he asked to no response.

As Derek’s arms were brought behind his back forcefully, he was handcuffed and read his rights.

“But I didn’t do anything,” he pleaded.

“What is this?” the officer asked in return, referring to the blood-stained garden fork resting on the desk.

“I used that to kill a goblin.”

“Goblins huh?”

“It matches the wounds inflicted on the victims, and they did say he was dressed as a goblin.”

“No—this is a mistake.”

“Sorry, kid, but there’s no mistake here. Your classmates explained the story you told in class yesterday and that pretty much matches up with what happened at Glen Finch’s party.”

“And Michael Ames was found just outside your house with three deep gashes across his face,” the second officer chimed in.

“No. Not Mike.”

“Why don’t you make this easy on yourself and tell us where the costume is?”

“There’s no costume. They’re real! I’ll prove it. I killed one of the bastards last night in the garage. Its body should still be there.”

“All right. C’mon, show us,” the officer said, pushing him forward.

Derek led them into the garage. “No. It was here,” he said, trotting off to the exact spot. “It was right here.”

The two officers laughed. There wasn’t even a drop of blood on the floor.

“They’re real I tell you,” Derek said, silencing their laughter.

Keith Gouveia

“Sure they are.”

“You’ll see. Next year, you’ll see,” Derek said with a grimace.

“Is that a threat?” one of them asked.

“No. It’s a promise.”

**Brother’s Keeper**  
**Susan M. Sailors**

Darkest of nights, brightest of moons,  
Blood shining black in the pale, misty light,  
This All Hallow’s Eve, I’ll have my desire.

I lost you, in the dark, in the door that we opened.  
You were taken from the safety of our circle  
And pulled deep into the strange void.

But I hear you in my dreams, for a brother’s love  
Cannot forget, and I will find you this very night  
And bring you back to the circle of our candle-lit haven.

Spilling our light into the darkness, we will touch you  
And pull you back to our realm. We shall end  
Your pain and restore ourselves to full power.

A life for a life is what the abyss craves most,  
So we are through with games. It shall have the life  
It desires, and you shall return to us here.

But the look in your eyes tells me not to take you back,  
Tells me to repel and bind what comes toward me,  
But I find I cannot, for a brother’s pain does not forget  
Or forgive. My foolish pride blasted you there  
And now I will pay the highest cost, having made you  
What you are and now unleashing you on this world.



# Breathing In the Past

Douglas E. Wright

**Ever since the disappearance of his folks**, sleeping had become a nightmare for Sam. Hardly a wink could be found after twilight. The only moments he could rest was during daylight, and now daybreak was telling him he could finally relax.

The autumn temperatures rose slightly with the sunrise; the verandah was the perfect place to lie down. Sam tried to close his eyes. His mind embraced an imaginary world. He needed to squeeze some darkness out of the cool misty dawn.

At the opposite end of the porch, a double swing hung from the

## Douglas E. Wright

rafters. Constructed of solid maple, it now resembled nothing more than potential firewood. He covered himself with a worn woolen blanket and tried to focus on the broken swing; his eyes resisted, coaxing his eyelids to close, moving him into another realm, far beyond the vestiges of a late Indian summer.

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As slumber embraced him, the scent of long ago filled his nostrils; the chirping of birds echoed and the buzz of flies signaled a brand new day. The summer sun cloaked the world with a pink hue. His face warmed as the sound and fragrances of his past sank into his catatonic mind.

In the distance, a lonely object rumbled over a country hillside. The machine looked like a moving shadow in the fog rather than an ancient combine cutting down late spring hay. He smiled as his mind floated about in this dream world.

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His sleepy eyes flicked open; he looked across the front yard. The *For Sale* sign at the edge of the driveway creaked in the autumn breeze. A scattering of colored leaves littered the driveway. Sam breathed in the Halloween air and drifted off.

\*\*\*

Honeybees fondled the apple blossoms just beyond Sam's reach. The breeze felt warm, light and fresh. Magazine pages fluttered on the well-maintained veranda floor. Maple leaves rustled while mischievous squirrels bounced from branch to branch in a wild chase of hide-n-seek. Sam stretched, his mind's eye partially open, he peeked into an old realm. A world he once knew.

The grating of a screen door cut the air. A moment slipped by. Like a crematorium entryway, it slammed shut again.

He opened his eyes and scanned the veranda. Nothing seemed out of place. Sam lifted his head and peered down his legs. Framed between his feet, he saw the old swing, looking new as it swung in a breeze. Sweat soaked his shirt. Flies freckled his skin.

His nose captured the aroma of frying eggs and ham. Filtering through the kitchen window, a sweet voice hummed a familiar tune.

His eyes shifted back and forth.

## Breathing in the Past

Her voice sang out, "Breakfast is ready!"

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Sam's eyes sprung wide open. He bolted upright. He glared at the silent screen door, then back down the length of the veranda. Dead leaves layered the lawn's final cut. A breeze swept the bare tree limbs against the autumn sky.

Sam dropped back down and drew the blanket over his head.

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The feeling of summer vacation comforted Sam when suddenly a petite foot kicked open his screen door. "Well, are we gonna eat or not?"

Sam was flabbergasted, this was *his* house, he lived here.

And he lived here *alone*!

The door slammed shut; the ghostly figure spun around and disappeared back inside. At the end of the porch, something semi-transparent swayed in a wicker rocking chair next to the swing.

Odd, yet recognizable, the way the cup was held, the posture, the cigarette smoke, and the way his eyes stared across the road. It was all very peculiar, still, very natural. He knew who was sitting in that wicker chair.

His long dead father.

Sam glanced back to the screen door. Through its mesh he saw his mother cooking breakfast.

"Yep, Ma . . . be in, in a sec," the fatherly phantom called.

With a wave of his hand, the specter motioned for Sam to approach, a gesture that was definitely his father's.

"What's the problem, Son?" it asked.

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A thunderous crash startled Sam. He pulled the blanket down. An old dump-truck rattled past. He wiped his eyes with his palms and then scanned the property. More traffic rolled by; kids dressed in Halloween costumes ran toward school. Sam cleared his throat and blinked back anxiety. *Only a dream*, he thought. He pulled out a mint, popped it into his mouth and tried to relax. After a few minutes his eyelids grew heavy.

He rediscovered his other world.

\*\*\*

## Douglas E. Wright

“Well, gonna answer or not?” his father asked.

Sam rose, swatted a fly over his head and pulled his sweaty shirt away from his skin. He warily walked toward the rocking chair. In a whisper he replied, “Know what the problem is, Dad?”

The phantom rocked back and forth. Its chair creaked in harmony with Sam’s thumping heart. Sam realized he could no longer taste the mint.

The specter’s gravely voice answered, “Of course I know. But, would’a thought you’d learn by now.” It paused momentarily and then continued, “You should try n’ figure it out, Son.” A match head cracked, blazed beneath the apparition’s split thumbnail. Sam moved back toward the screened kitchen door.

Barely over the threshold, he confronted a transparent figure standing by a red and chrome kitchen table. Sam smirked, recalling the time he gave the set away.

The scent of his mom’s kitchen took over his senses. He had completely forgotten the smell of split hickory smoldering in the cook stove, the aroma of pickling spices, and the smell of freshly toasted raisin bread.

Above the white porcelain sink, the original mullioned kitchen window was still in place, not the smaller more energy-efficient version Sam had installed later. An array of herbs hung delicately around the window’s frame, while on the counter clove-filled apples surrounded tin plates of freshly baked pies. A hand pump, which hauled water up from the cellar cistern, rested peacefully over the sink. Ancient chair-rails were again fastened to the walls, suspending a couple of unused kitchen chairs off the floor. Cherry-patterned dishes reappeared on long-forgotten plate-rails. A set of clear bubble-glass cups and saucers, treasures excavated from depression era laundry detergent, hung precariously under the cupboards. A multitude of old-fashioned pots and pans dangled from the white embossed-tin ceiling. Finally, a new scenic wool blanket appeared, neatly folded over the spine of the press-back chair, reserved for a budgie Sam scarcely remembered.

The fatherly ghost appeared beside him, “So, wanna sell her, eh?” Its likeness oscillated like waves of prairie heat.

“Sell what?”

\*\*\*

Sam’s snores punched the air. A creaking tree limb awakened him. His eyes fluttered open. Traffic echoed in his ears. Sam glanced down

## Breathing in the Past

the veranda, the old broken swing sat where it had always been. He grinned; it was a hallucination, a dream. He wiggled into the couch cushions and closed his eyes again.

\*\*\*

Sam felt a hand wrap around his wrist. A silver wedding band sparkled in the sunlit kitchen.

“The house is now in your name, ain’t it boy?”

“Of course,” Sam answered. Humidity soaked the air.

Perspiration spotted his face.

“Maybe you should fix the basement.”

“What are you talkin’ about, old man?”

The apparition hushed its tone. “You need my help, can’t do it yourself now, can ya? I know you can’t . . . never could do anything yourself.”

Sam sat bewildered. Across from the two of them, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror hanging on the cupboard door.

Somehow he looked different. Much younger. He brushed the back of his hand along his cheek. Not only had his skin tightened, his vision had cleared and his diction was not as harsh.

Sam admired his reflection. No longer was he the person he used to be. Sam was not the unemployed man he had become accustomed to seeing. Instead, he had traveled back through time.

Abruptly, the reflection became distorted. It frightened him.

He pivoted and whispered to the ghost. “What the hell is goin’ on here?”

His parents slowly transformed from ghostly images to bubbling, coagulating, dripping flesh.

“You haven’t answered me,” his father said.

Sam’s voice cracked and rose. “What are you sayin’, Dad?”

His father wiped his mouth with a decomposing forearm. Bits of flesh flaked off. “You’ve always needed my help. Somehow you have to get outa this predicament, don’t ya?”

“What’s happening here?” Sam shouted.

His mother’s words gurgled over her lips like syrup dribbling down a stack of pancakes. “Now, now, we’re only here to help.”

A feeble laugh escaped his father’s belly. “Just like ole’ times, eh Son?” he cackled. “Haven’t a clue what’s real and what isn’t, do ya?”

Sam sat down grim-faced and silent.

“What about a decision there, lad? Thought you would’ve learned how to make one by now.”

## Douglas E. Wright

Sam glanced about the room while drawing quick sharp shallow breaths. His mother vanished. Sam was no longer sure if she had left the room, or the world.

The old ghost harped again, “A decision lad, god-damn it boy, can’t ya do anything right?”

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Sam rolled over and opened his eyes. He lifted them toward the veranda’s ceiling. Its ancient paint hung in short strips. A tear trickled down his cheek. He shivered. The smell of his mother’s cooking, now just a distant and pretty much forgotten memory. A veil of melting frost dripped off the veranda’s railing. Again, he closed his eyes.

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Sam found himself in *his* kitchen. His father’s words echoed in his ears, but all he heard was a low garbled rumbling sound.

Suddenly, the ghost shrieked.

Sam’s words tumbled off his trembling tongue, “You fuckin’ ole’ fool!”

“Come, come Son. . .the basement lad. . .the basement.” The old man’s grinning face changed from watery skin to aged split leather while his words jumped over his pulsating lips. Sam choked as he cleared his throat. Sweat cascaded down his face.

Then, Sam evened his tone; his carefully chosen words hissed through clenched teeth. “What about the basement?”

The old man beamed. “To cement or not to cement. . .that seems to be the question, don’t you think?”

Sam felt disbelief, existing in a distant vaporous world.

“Ya just can’t sell this place with a dirt floor now, can ya?”

Sam stared out through the *new* kitchen window. “Don’t think it really matters . . . does it?”

“What is it, boy?” the old man screeched, startling Sam.

“Well, you’re the one with the advice, Dad. You tell me!”

“Just like ole’ times, eh Son? Never could figure out anything ‘till it bit you on the ass.” With that said the old man pushed out another belly laugh.

Sam snorted like a rebellious child. The apparition dissolved into mist. “Better fix it, boy,” the specter said, its words fading into oblivion.

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## Breathing in the Past

Air brakes pierced the air. A cement truck came to a halt after it backed up the steep driveway. A rusty half-ton truck filled with Halloween costumed workers followed behind. In the box of the truck Sam saw shovels and pick-axes. The workers were as visible to his eye as they were loud to his ears.

“Where do ya want us?” a middle-aged driver dressed as a ghoulish rock star, yelled from the pick-up.

Sam pulled himself up from the threadbare couch and saw a child vampire checking the *For Sale* sign.

“Over here,” Sam waved. He leapt from the couch and hopped down the steps to the crumbled walkway.

“Follow me,” he said, waving his hands. “Pour it down here,” he hollered, stabbing the air with one hand while directing the driver to a cellar window with the other. The costumed laborers followed Sam like puppies on patrol to the back door.

“I thought Halloween was tonight,” Sam laughed. “Isn’t it tonight?”

They traipsed into the house and down the hall as Sam anxiously scanned the bordering rooms for remnants of his dream. The bouquet of yesteryear had dissipated. Sam saw nothing more than what was there the day before.

He yanked on a cracked wooden door. As it gently swayed outward, a dark stale odor rose from the basement. He cautiously stepped down the stairs using his shoulder to guide his way along the damp stone wall. The laborers, dressed as demons, psycho-clowns and outlaws, watched Sam stumble through the shadows.

Once he reached the bottom, he fiddled with a window frame and pushed it open. Within seconds, he found the cellar ceiling light; its string appeared, dangling out of the gloom.

The open window allowed the Indian summer air to rejuvenate the basement’s musty atmosphere. Soon, he had pried most of the windows open. A pile of dead brittle leaves swooshed in. Almost at once, the dank interior began to dry.

A couple workers, dressed as Satan and Beelzebub, peered in from outside, through one of the cellar windows.

At the top of the stairway, the rest of the laborers filtered down into the old hand-dug cellar. Soon, their whispers grew into shouts as they handed tools to one another through the windows. One of them, a young lad not more than eighteen, made up as a gangster, secretly slid through an open window after his boss, Genghis Khan, vanished upstairs.

An older man, looking like an exhausted wolf man, jerked a metal slide from the rear of the cement truck. The tube soon rested on the

## Douglas E. Wright

basement window ledge. Sam returned upstairs, leaving the men to their work. Outside, the truck opened its giant rotating cylinder and pebble-filled slush careened down its metal chute into the basement.

An hour passed before Sam realized the noises from below had ceased. The silence went on forever. He laid down his *Nocturnal Musings* magazine. Whispers drifted through the floorboards. The idling truck was as serene as a graveyard on Christmas Eve. Tranquility was victorious until voices took over the stairwell.

Sam felt agitation. All he could hear was the laborers' shuffling noises and whispers. He climbed from his recliner and edged across the floor.

He opened the door. Their murmurs became clearer. He stepped onto the first run. A hushed conversation lingered. He crept to the next.

Silence.

He inched downward until he reached the bottom.

The workers stood quietly in a semicircle.

He couldn't see past them. "What's going on?" he asked.

One by one, they turned. Each dressed as a policeman. Except for Genghis, who was now the town sheriff. "Don't ya know?"

Clad in plaid slippers, Sam waded through ankle-deep concrete. When he reached the semi-circle, they parted, leaving only enough space for him to enter.

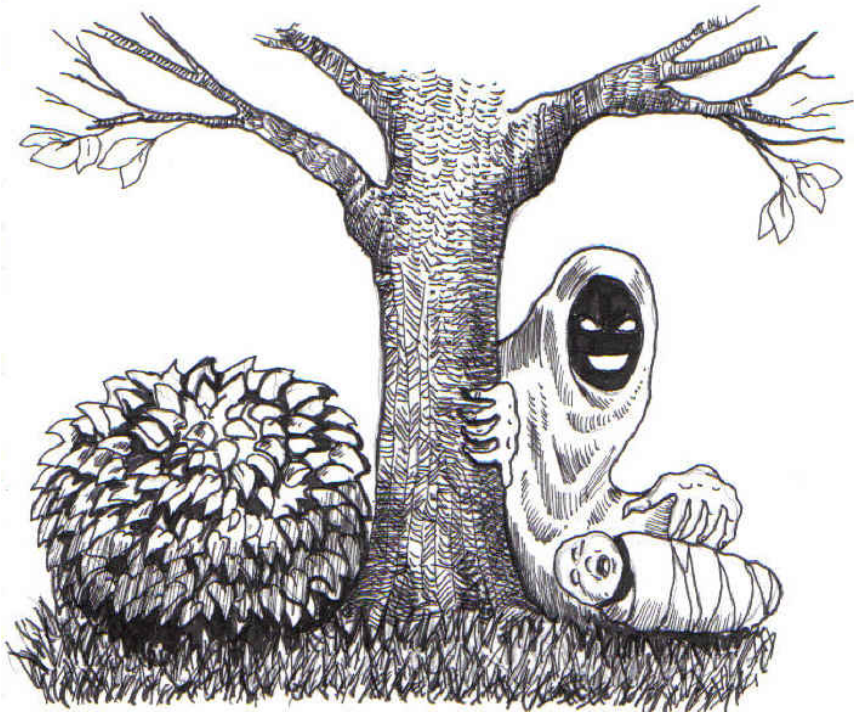
The light illuminated the deluge of wet, gray concrete. A clammy stench grew. The poured cement had eaten a shallow trench into the earthen floor.

Sam swung his eyes down to a protruding tree root. He looked closer. More than one stretched out of the cement pool.

A silver band glinted from a finger-sized limb.

Reality melted into Sam's horrified face.

"I buried them deeper!" he shrieked, clawing at his features. "I know I did. I know I buried them. . . way deeper than that!"



# The Jackthief

Andersen Prunty

**Oletta Goom** woke up on the morning of October 31<sup>st</sup>, going into the baby's room and knowing exactly what she would find.

Emptiness.

The crib stood in the middle of the room, white cotton blankets piled up against one side. Outside, the wind, turned cold with the season, spat at the house and invaded the open window. Oletta grabbed the worn wooden rail of the crib with a bony hand and cried, her tears running down her wrinkled face and falling onto the cotton sheet that still smelled faintly of Jacquelyn. "Jack," Oletta had called her.

But now Jack was gone.

## Andersen Prunty

Just like all of the girls that had come before her. And it was always on this day, the first birthday, Halloween, that the Jackthief came and took them away. Now she would have to wait another year before going into the haunted woods to claim her prize.

Unless she could find out where the Jackthief took the babies. Unless she could get this one back.

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Oletta had been several years younger when she had retreated to her house in the woods. Perhaps it was more of a shack, but it served the purposes of shelter and warmth just fine and that was all she needed now. Shelter and warmth. Maybe it wasn't all she *wanted*, but it was all she needed, along with a little food every now and then.

What Oletta wanted more than anything was a baby. She was not a young woman anymore, twenty years past childbearing age, but that desire had never left her. It was only since the death of her husband that she realized it was an impossibility. Before, she had always prayed for a miracle. Maybe, she had thought, God would fix whatever was broken inside of her and she would finally get pregnant. But it was never meant to be.

So her husband had died and she had moved to the woods feeling like, if she was going to be alone, she was going to do it right.

But moving to the woods proved to be the source of more joy and sorrow than she would ever know.

It was there she met the Jackthief. There, during the strangest of circumstances.

Summer was buried, Halloween standing atop it like a cold gray tombstone, and Oletta didn't see how she was going to spend a winter alone in the tiny shack. She figured her best days were well behind her and there weren't going to be any good ones ahead. She found a length of strong rope in the old woodshed. She was going to take the rope out into the woods, find a good sturdy branch, and hang herself. She didn't plan on learning how to do it proper. If she had to dangle for a while, choking on her own windpipe, then she just figured that would be penance for the awesome sin she was about to undertake.

After a brief survey, she found a branch that would do the trick. The rope was slung around her neck to give her frail arms the strength to carry an old wooden ladder. It was a gray day. The clouds were bloated black-gray, threatening rain. Maybe, if it rained, it would help weigh down her body.

It took about a half an hour to make sure everything was in place.

## The Jackthief

She figured the knot was strong enough to do the trick. Climbing to the top of the ladder, the fiber of the rope scratchy around her neck, the sky rumbled a hungry growl and she hoped it would drown out the sound of her strangling to death.

Standing at the top of the ladder, she wondered if she was doing the right thing. But this wasn't a spontaneous decision. It was something she had thought about for a very long time. This was the only way out. The lonely days had become unendurable and she was too proud to be stuck in this constant state of self-pity.

The sky screamed.

Oletta took a deep breath and kicked the ladder away.

She dropped. The rope tightened around her neck.

And then broke.

She fell to the ground, lightning streaked across the sky, fat cold drops of rain hammered down, and her life changed forever.

On the other side of the tree she had tried to use to kill herself, a baby cried. Oletta unfastened the rope from around her neck, not believing what it was she thought she heard. Nursing a twisted ankle, she trudged through the dead leaves turned soggy, until she found the source of the crying.

When she saw the baby, swaddled in black cloth, at the base of the tree, her face split and her tears mingled with the beating rain. Stooping down, she picked up the baby and took it back to the house, wanting to get it out of the rain, wanting to get it into the warmth.

Sometimes, Oletta knew, when a person wants something so much, it is not necessary to question the source. It is not necessary to question the truth or validity behind that desire. A Christian wants God to save them and an afterlife to house their soul when they die. The Christian does not question these things; he believes them and calls that belief faith. So, Oletta believed in her new baby maybe not so much as born but given to her on this Halloween day.

She took it home with her. First she named her Jacquelyn and called her Jack. She loved Jack. She fed her and sang to her and talked to her and cared for her and took her everywhere she went. She even took her into the town to buy food and clothes, not caring if the folk talked and wondered. They would, Oletta knew, come up with their own reasons why she now had a baby and those reasons could not come even remotely close to the fantastic truth.

For exactly one year, Oletta was the mother of a beautiful baby.

On Jack's first birthday, Oletta opened the door to her room and discovered the baby gone, the bedroom window opened, a cold wind blowing in. The following year, she searched for baby Jack. Searched

## Andersen Prunty

and mourned because she knew the baby was gone.

That was the worst year of Oletta's life, having had something and then lost it. Each day was worse than the one before. Her life had become a spiraling black nightmare as she wondered about who would steal the only thing she had ever wanted. She never found the Jackthief, but she had a picture of him in her mind.

The Jackthief was carved from wood and bone. He traveled by moonlight and drank the sorrow of others. He was drawn to this sorrow and drunk off it, had to create more. Oletta knew the Jackthief had always been there. He was the one who had snapped the rope when the only thing she wanted to do was snap her neck. He did it because she had not suffered enough. She was a well of suffering, and the Jackthief had not drunk the last of that well. So he had let her love the baby for a year. And just as quickly, he had taken it away. Now he surrounded her in the woods, watching her, mocking her silently as she searched and searched.

A year later, she found baby Jack in the same place she had found her two years earlier. The baby was the same size as the very first time Oletta found her and she had a distinct feeling of falling back two years in time. But, once again, the sorrow had lifted. She had her baby. Maybe the circumstances were not normal. Maybe they weren't even believable, but it was nice to hold Jack in her arms once again and feel a year of sadness melt away.

Over the next two years, the cycle repeated itself.

Always from Halloween to Halloween. One year of joy. One of sorrow. One a trick. The other, of course, a treat.

After losing Jack again, Oletta did not search for her.

She sat in her house and waited, her mind expanding out into that depressed madness, knowing her time would come again. Yet, knowing that did not make it easier. The only thing she could think of was the year after that, when she would have to go without the baby again. The Trickyear. And, after all, wasn't the point of having a baby to watch it grow? To shape it and give it a good life? To see what kind of adult it became?

That year, Oletta decided she was not going to go without Jack again.

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On October 31<sup>st</sup>, when she found Jack under the tree, Oletta said to her, "I'm never letting you go. If he takes you again, I will find you." And she took the baby back home and they had another good year-- the Treatyear—but now the time had come again and Oletta stood in an

## The Jackthief

empty room, surrounded by nightmares.

That morning, she left the house in search of the Jackthief, knowing he was out there, somewhere. She was not going to go back home until she found the baby. For days, she wandered deeper into the woods, the noose of cold and hunger wrapping around her neck.

Madness rats nibbled at her brain. She followed the Jackthief. She followed his scent. He smelled like wax and fallen leaves. He smelled like memories. Some nights, she thought she heard the baby crying. Some nights, she thought she heard the Jackthief laughing.

She became hungry and confused, knowing she was too far from her house to ever get back. The sorrow was black and swollen in her mind. She let it grow, knowing that the greater the sorrow, the more likely she was to see the Jackthief. And then she could take her baby back.

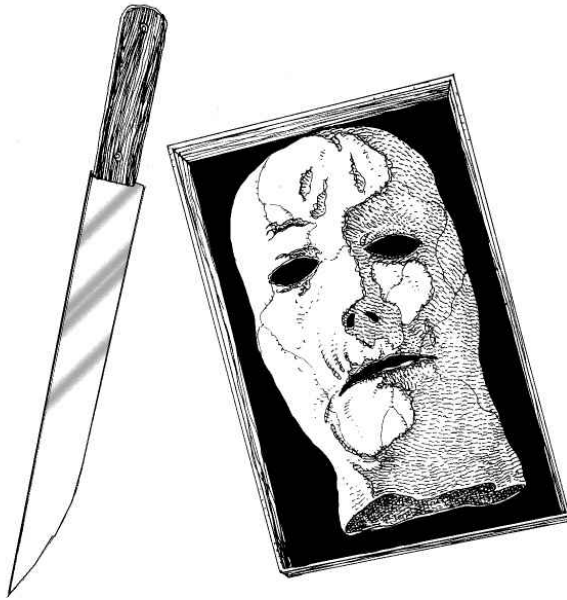
On the night of her death, before the Jackthief came and took the sorrow away for good, Oletta couldn't open her eyes. She couldn't see the Jackthief. But she thought she could open her eyes far enough to see the little black bundle he held in his arms. She pawed at the blankets, wanting to touch Jack's soft baby skin one last time but the thing inside the blankets was not Jack.

It was carved from wood and bone.

It smelled like burning wax and dead leaves.

And when it opened its mouth, it didn't want milk, it wanted to drink sorrow and a whole life filled with longing. And when it satiated itself on those things, it laughed, and moved onto the next person in the next town.





# The Man Behind the Mask

David Bell

**For twenty-five dollars a day, I wore the mask.**

What mask, you ask? And why did I wear it?

Shit, you all know; you've all seen it about fifty times. You've probably seen it in your dreams. Your nightmares to be more exact.

What you haven't seen is me. My face. But you've damn sure seen that stupid mask. They sell it in Wal-Mart every Halloween. Show it on the movie channels, the drive-ins, the video store.

Ten days work at twenty-five dollars a day. You do the math. I'm tired of thinking about it.

Twenty-five years ago, I'm working in a body shop in my hometown of Elwood, Indiana. Painting, finishing. Decent money for a

guy like me who never went to college. Barely finished high school, for what that's worth. School was never really my thing anyway.

So the body work did me okay. Gave me some spending money. A car, a little apartment. It wasn't going to make me a millionaire or anything, but who ever gets that? I figured my life was about what I deserved.

Back then, I was in good shape. Lifted some weights, did a little running. Played on the offensive line during high school. The body shop kept me moving and using my muscles.

One day this guy I work with comes in says that his sister is working for a movie director. They're going to make a movie in Elwood. A horror movie. Some low budget thing about a bunch of teenagers getting slaughtered.

"She says they need a guy like you, Tony. A big guy. Someone who will scare people."

"You think I scare people?" I asked.

"Your mom probably isn't afraid of you," he said.

It sounded like a joke to me. Who the fuck ever makes a movie in Elwood?

But I needed some extra money—who doesn't, right?—and the idea of being in a movie kind of got me excited. My luck with the ladies had been a little...sporadic at the time, and I figured it would make a good pick-up line.

You know that movie they're shooting here? Well, I'm in it...

So I found out the information and I went to the audition. They must have liked what they saw—or else they were desperate—because they offered me the job on the spot.

I was going to be the bad guy.

Turned out, they weren't looking for Sir Larry Olivier or anything.

I didn't have a single line in the entire movie.

All I had to do was carry a big butcher knife, puff up my chest, and chase screaming girls around an abandoned church on Halloween night.

And I had to wear that mask.

Since their budget was for shit, they couldn't make a real mask. They just went to the local costume shop and bought some old Planet of the Apes' mask, something with a lot of hair. They monkeyed around with it—painted it, stretched it, teased the hair out—so that when I put the thing on I looked like some kind of lunatic.

And it worked.

When I put that thing on and started chasing those little bimbos around, they really screamed. They let loose like they were being tortured or something. I mean these chicks looked terrified. And it wasn't

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because they were good actresses or anything. They were just little teenyboppers who could barely remember their lines. They couldn't walk and think at the same time.

But they were afraid of me. I noticed that they stayed away from me between takes. If I tried to talk to one of them at the catering table, they just kind of backed away like I had a disease. At first I thought they were just stuck-up bitches, the type I knew plenty of in high school.

But then I came to understand that it was that mask.

It got to the point where I hated being in the same room with the thing. I'd go into the make-up trailer in the morning, and that thing would be sitting there on the counter...just sort of looking, with its empty, dead eyes.

I couldn't wait to be done with it.

And before I knew it, I was.

My ten days were up real quick, and on the last day, they handed me a check for two hundred and fifty bucks, minus Uncle Sam's cut. And they stuck a little piece of paper in front of me saying that I wasn't entitled to any cut of the box office, merchandising, sequels etc. I thought they were joking. So I signed it.

I figured that was the last I would ever hear of that stupid movie.

Except, something funny happened.

People went crazy for that movie. *Halloween High*, they called it.

What a bullshit name.

It started slow, through word of mouth. But pretty soon, people were lining up to see it, and the movie went from showing in a few drive-ins in Bumfuckville to about a thousand theatres all across the country.

Newspapers wrote stories about it. Newsweek did a spread. And the thing made money hand over fist.

Every story mentioned that the movie only cost \$75,000 to make, but the box office take kept going up. Twenty million. Forty million. Seventy-five. It became the highest grossing horror film of all-time.

I started seeing the lead bimbo all over my television. Talk shows, news programs. She was the flavor of the moment. It didn't matter to anybody that she didn't have a brain in her head or that she couldn't act her way out of a paper bag. They loved her. And pretty soon she was announcing other movie deals. She was going to be a bonafide movie star.

And the director was all over the place, too.

Ron Davidson. Mr. Bigshot Hollywood.

Let me just say, I never liked that guy. He was a little guy, about five-six, and he strutted around while we were making that movie like he was Napoleon. Full of himself, barking orders. He wanted us all to think

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he was making great art. *All the President's Men* or some shit instead of a low-budget horror movie. Guy never even gave me the time of day. Just pointed and told me where to stand. If I passed him between shots, he would act like he didn't know me. I don't think he even knew my name.

But he put up most of the money for the movie. He used his credit cards, mortgaged his house. So most of what the movie made was pure profit for him. Millions upon millions of dollars. And those Hollywood shits all came around sniffing his ass after that. They offered him the moon, the sun and the stars to write and direct whatever shit he wanted. They didn't care how good it was, they just wanted his name on it. So he kept churning the stuff out, and they kept paying him, and everybody who worked on the movie—even the make-up people who made that stupid mask—got richer and richer.

Everybody except me.

After the movie hit it big, I sat back and bided my time.

I figured I'd be getting some calls myself: interviews, offers, endorsements.

The guys at work kidded me whenever I came in and punched the clock.

"What are you still doing here, Hollywood?" they said.

I just laughed. I felt like a guy with a million dollar lottery ticket in my pocket. All I had to do was cash it in.

The local paper did a story. I still have a copy—yellow and crumbling—in a drawer in my bedroom. At the end of the interview, the reporter asked me if I had plans to act again.

"Of course," I said. "It worked out pretty well the first time."

But nobody ever called.

It was as if I disappeared off the face of the earth, at least as far as Hollywood and the movies were concerned.

The guys at work stopped asking me. People in town went back to treating me like they always did. My life went back to the way it was before, only worse, because now I didn't have something that I knew I deserved.

When the movie started making all that money, people started talking about a sequel. All right, I thought, here comes my big payday.

When I didn't hear anything about it, I placed a call to Hollywood myself, to the offices of the big man's production company. Ron Davidson Enterprises. Of course, he wasn't available, but I left a message with my name and phone number. I even made it clear to the secretary that she was talking to a star.

"You know," I said, "I played the killer in *Halloween High*."

## The Man Behind the Mask

“I’ll give him the message, sir.”

But he never called me back. And no one from his company did either.

So I called and called again, week after week. I kept talking to that same secretary, and every time I called, she acted like she had never heard of me. I was polite and respectful, even though I knew I was getting the brush-off.

Then one day I saw in the paper that the director was shooting his sequel, and as he put it, “the whole cast was reunited.” Everyone but me, I guess.

My movie career was over before it even started.

My life over the last twenty-five years has certainly had its ups and downs.

I didn’t stay in the body repair business. I’ve had a few other jobs.

Some construction. Carpet and upholstery cleaning. Assembly line work. I’ve been unemployed for stretches too, living off a government check. I got married in there somewhere to a girl from my high school. We had a couple kids together, but things didn’t work out, as they often don’t. I had to hustle to make child-support, sometimes working a second job, and sometimes just not making ends meet.

And for a time, I kept trying to get a hold of Ron Davidson.

The calls tapered off over the years, but I would still occasionally get the itch to try. Usually, I would call late at night, when I couldn’t sleep and the TV was playing nothing but infomercials because I couldn’t afford cable. I’d throw back about five or six beers and do a little “drunk-dialing.” I’d call the big man’s office and get his answering machine or voicemail and just talk too it.

Sometimes I’d just tell him how it was, how tough it was to try to make a living.

Sometimes I’d get emotional and maybe cry a little.

A lot of the times, I’d get pissed and maybe tell him that I was going to wring his scrawny-ass neck if I ever laid eyes on him again.

But I always ended the same way.

“Hey man, if you can throw a little work my way. Stunt work. Extra work. Anything. Just give me a call. You know I can do it, man. We made a hit together.”

Only once did he make contact with me.

It was a package in the mail, not a phone call.

This was about fifteen years after the movie came out.

I don’t know how he found my address since I had been moving around a lot, ducking bill collectors, but I guess if you’re a big shot Hollywood director you can find people.

## David Bell

So one day I find this package outside my door with a return address from the big man's production company in L.A. I couldn't help myself. I allowed my hopes to soar. I figured maybe he sent me some scripts or an offer of some kind of job.

I ripped the package open and what do I see instead:

That godawful mask. Those empty eyes and that fucked up hair.

What kind of sick joke was he pulling?

But then I thought: Maybe he wants me to be in one of the sequels or a remake or something.

So I dug around in the box until I found a note.

*Dear Tony, Accept this as a token of my appreciation for your work on my film, Halloween High. There is quite a market for movie memorabilia, and this should fetch a high price—perhaps in the twenty thousand dollar range. Consider this your bonus for the success of the film and allow us to then call things 'even.' As someone who knows this business well, I can assure you that you are not a 'Hollywood' person. You are too raw, too untutored. However, I hope this gift gets you over whatever rough patch you have encountered in life.*

*Best,  
Ron Davidson.*

*PS—If you call me again, I will have to report you to the police. Don't make this unpleasant.*

So I never did call him again.

But I still have that mask.

Sure, I looked into selling it. Only an idiot wouldn't.

I even called a memorabilia dealer in California, told him who I was and what I had. Would he be interested?

Of course, he said. Even quoted me a price of fifteen thousand right there on the phone, but I got the feeling he would be willing to pay more. That was more money than I've ever had or seen in my life. It would get me out from under some things, get my head a little above the water.

But I couldn't make the deal.

I've kept that thing in a box in my closet for the last ten years. I know it seems like I can't let go of my past glory, but it's more than just that.

I've always had the feeling I was going to be able to use that thing again someday.

As fate would have it, I'm going to get my chance.

I read in the local paper that Mr. Big himself, Ron Davidson, is

## The Man Behind the Mask

coming back to Elwood. And he's not coming alone.

Turns out he's bringing the whole cast back to Elwood tonight for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening of *Halloween High*. The movie's getting re-released with the sound and picture cleaned up and some extra footage of the lead bimbo doing her nails or something.

Of course, everybody in Elwood is bouncing off the walls over the news. Movie stars are coming to town. Glamour and the media and the money.

Hell, I've been walking among them for twenty-five years, and they don't get excited about me.

There's even a rumor that Ron Davidson is going to announce a new movie project, a sequel that brings back the original cast and the original lead bimbo. Nevermind that her character was offend in the third sequel about twenty years ago. He's a movie director—if he wants her back to life, she'll be back to life.

So tonight, I'll put on the mask for the first time in twenty-five years.

I'll buy a butcher knife like the one I used in the movie. It won't cost much since this is a low-budget production.

I'll show up at the premiere, reprising my greatest and only movie role.

I'll make sure everybody gets exactly what they deserve.

And this time, I'll be the one who walks away famous.





# Halloween Eddie's

Alan I'Anson

Nathan wished he'd added another layer of clothing beneath his disguise. He'd only walked a few blocks and the damp night had already seeped right through to his skin. The devil's mask he wore bugged him too. It smelled like old rubber bands, and his breath condensed inside wetting his chin and neck.

Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees walked by. Nathan blinked rapidly and glanced down as they passed, but neither horror icon gave

him the even slightest bit of attention.

Nathan grinned. What other night of the year could you stalk the city disguised from head to foot and no one gives you a second glance? *Praise the Underlord and the parents of every little vampire, ghoul and demon walking the streets tonight.*

He pinched the devil's rubbery chin and pulled it away from his face. A miserable drizzle of condensation dribbled into the hollow of his throat.

*Fucking mask.*

Halloween was a dumb holiday anyway. Witches and demons? Grown adults dressed as white-faced vampires, walking the streets crying 'trick or treat' for a handful of sweets? How lame was that? His father had never taken him out on Halloween; but then again his father had never done a lot of things.

Nathan slowed his pace. Halloween Eddie's costume and novelty store stood on the next corner. Dumb holiday and an even dumber name for a shop, he thought. The guy who owned it wasn't even called Eddie. Dude's name was Seymour.

And what was the idea of naming a shop that was open all year round after a single annual holiday anyway? Sure, Eddie's sold all kinds of spooky shit, but Halloween Eddie's all year round? That wasn't just dumb - it was plain stupid.

Nathan eased into the shadows and watched Seymour's apartment behind the shop. A home made jack-o'-lantern sat in the window, candles flickering behind its leathery skin.

Seymour was on his door step, entertaining a bunch of kids in plastic masks and capes, laughing and passing out candy. He was a tall man with a scrawny face and a graying bird's nest of a beard. His face was painted white with black around the eyes, his mouth bulging with a set of goofy plastic vampire teeth. A flowing, crimson-lined cape completed the costume.

He gave the kids a vampire-like hiss, and waved them farewell before closing the door.

Nathan waited a half-minute, shivering and wondering if he should still go through with it. Seymour lived alone, but Nathan hadn't thought about trick or treaters calling. Half the costumes on the street tonight were probably hired from Halloween Eddie's. People liked Seymour and his novelty shop. Nathan should have realized they would include the shopkeeper in their rounds.

Still, Nathan reasoned, he should be in and out in minutes. If anyone knocked while he was inside, he could just ignore them until they got fed up and moved on. He felt uneasy about it, but it was a risk he was willing

## Halloween Eddie's

to take.

Nathan crossed the wet blacktop to the apartment and stood at the door. It was getting late, not many people about, and they all seemed too preoccupied with the festivities to notice a lone trick or treater anyway.

Nathan rapped on the door with leather-clad knuckles. Adrenaline rushed him, quickening his heart. Suddenly his palms were slick, his nerves wrenched tight.

The pumpkin grinned at him through the glass, its eyes burning orange and yellow. A shadow passed over it and the flames shimmered.

Seymour opened the door, glow-in-the-dark fangs already bared, hands raised in camp dramatics. But when he saw Nathan's devil-faced appearance, he hesitated.

Nathan drew a semi-automatic pistol from his pocket, holding it low and close to his body.

"Inside," he ordered.

Seymour's hands remained in the air. He looked frightened, but confused. "What?" he asked.

Nathan gritted his teeth. *Fucking mask!*

"Get inside!" he said in a louder voice.

Seymour retreated into his living room, his hands still raised, his gaze glued to the pistol.

Nathan closed the door behind him and reached out to flip the pumpkin off the sill. It split open on the floor, splashes of hot wax dousing the candles. Gray threads of smoke curled from between its roughly carved teeth.

Nathan took stock. They were in a cramped living room lit by a couple of small table lamps. By the side of a battered armchair, a sprawling avalanche of books and magazines spilled across the threadbare carpet. The television played, the sound turned way down. The channel was showing *Phantasm*.

"What do you want?" Seymour asked.

"Shut the fuck up!" Nathan said, deepening the tone of his voice.

"Okay," Seymour said. "Take it easy. I'll do whatever you say."

"Sit down!"

Seymour did as he was told.

Nathan brandished the pistol. "I want the money, man. I want all the cash outta the safe."

Seymour looked horrified. "What money?"

Nathan stepped closer, focusing the pistol on Seymour's face. "Don't fuck with me!"

Seymour squeezed his eyes shut, averting his face and hunching his shoulders. The plastic teeth slipped from his mouth, a silvery string of

saliva still attaching them to his quivering lip.

"This place is a fucking goldmine this time of the year," Nathan said. "I want it all."

"But it's not here," Seymour told him. "I don't keep it here."

"Bullshit! Give me the money or I swear to God I'll fucking kill you."

"It's gone!" Seymour insisted. "I banked it."

Nathan blinked rapidly. His mouth worked, but no sound came out. Banked it? But Seymour didn't bank the takings until the following day. Sometimes he'd even leave it until Friday. Nathan had been observing long enough to know that.

"You're lying, man! You keep the money in the safe!"

"I do...*normally* I do...but not on Halloween. I don't like keeping that much cash over night on Halloween."

Nathan stood there panting, the devil face sucking in and out like a shriveled heart. This wasn't the plan. Seymour *had* to be lying.

Nathan dragged him off the sofa and manhandled him into the hall leading to the shop. "Open it!" he shouted, and offered encouragement with a painful jab of the pistol.

Glancing back nervously, Seymour opened the cupboard under the stairs. He moved a cardboard box hiding the small vault, dialed in the combination and opened the chunky door.

"Take a look," he said. "There's no cash."

Nathan pushed Seymour aside and checked. The safe was empty but for a few worthless documents.

"Fuck!" Nathan said. "FUCK!"

He turned on Seymour, ramming the terrified man against the wall and pinning him there with a forearm across his throat. He thrust the pistol into Seymour's face and deliberately cocked the hammer. "I'm warning you, man, if you're *lying* to me..."

Seymour's eyes bulged like a cartoon from the black makeup. "I'm not! I swear to you I'm not. I have twenty-five dollars in my wallet. Please, take it!"

*Twenty-five dollars?* He'd risked all this for twenty-five lousy dollars? There must be *something* in this shit-hole worth taking - jewelry or an expensive wristwatch?

Nathan suddenly became aware that Seymour was peering down at him, his brow creased and his eyes narrowed.

"What the fuck you looking at, man?"

"Nathan?"

Nathan froze in horror.

"It is you, isn't it?" Seymour said. "*What the hell are you doing,*

## Halloween Eddie's

boy?"

For a second, Nathan couldn't breathe. His head prickled with heat and sweat. The plan had hinged on anonymity and in a moment that mask had somehow been snatched away.

*What made him think he could pull off an armed robbery? He was sixteen for God-sake!*

Seymour's fear sizzled into anger and he seemed to grow in stature, pushing the pistol away as if it were a toy. "Take that stupid mask off!" he shouted.

Nathan shuffled back a few steps, unsure of what he should do next. The game was up. He was caught. He pointed the gun again, his aim trembling. "Don't mess with me, Seymour," he warned, but his voice sounded laughably weak and childish.

Seymour didn't even flinch. "Mess with you? It's the police who're going to be messing with you, Nathan. You're going to jail, boy."

He strode off into the living room.

"Seymour, stop," Nathan called. When he didn't, Nathan followed, tears already welling in his eyes.

Seymour picked up the cordless phone. "I can't believe this, Nathan, I just can't. I tried to be a friend to you, boy. I even let you work in my shop...and this is how you repay me?"

He tapped 911 into the keypad.

Nathan raised the pistol, the tears blurring his vision. "Put it down, Seymour...please."

"Put it down, my ass," Seymour said. He turned his back as the connection was made. "Yes. Police, please."

"Seymour..."

Nathan looked at the gun with dismay. It wasn't worth shit now and Seymour knew it. But he couldn't just stand here while the cops were called on him. Through a starry web of tears, he tried to pistol-whip Seymour across the back of the skull, misjudging the blow and striking him across the back of the neck instead.

The room exploded briefly in a vicious white flash of noise and fire. Seymour pitched head first onto a small wooden table, the cape billowing behind him and the phone flying from his hand. The table collapsed under his weight, a lamp jumping into the air and rolling on its side, its shade throwing hard and soft curving shadows across the wall and floor.

Everything fell quiet, except for the indecipherable murmurings of the television set.

Nathan stared, his ears ringing, acrid gun smoke swirling around him like a blue wraith.

Blood was coming out of Seymour's ear.

## Alan I'Anson

Realization slammed into him like a truck. He put the gun away and ripped back the mask. The rubber tore hair from his scalp, but the pain barely registered.

“Seymour! I didn’t mean to shoot you, man.”

The storekeeper lay face down on the flattened table, the harsh light picking out the vivid blood pulsing from the gunshot wound in the back of his head.

Nathan rolled him over, grimacing at the loose flap of skin and bone that flopped over Seymour’s eye. Splatters of pink jelly glistened and shivered on the polished tabletop like hot blancmange.

Seymour shuddered, his eyes wide and staring. He convulsed, blood welling in his mouth and oozing down the sides of his face, stark crimson lines against the white makeup.

“Oh Jesus, Seymour!” Nathan shouted. “Don’t do this, man. It was an accident.”

Seymour’s eyes rolled up into his head and the shaking gradually ebbed away. He let out a long, gurgling sigh and then fell still.

Nathan blinked and swallowed, swallowed and blinked, his breathing stripped to a series of short, disbelieving gasps.

*How had all this gone so wrong?*

He staggered a few drunken steps away from Seymour’s dead face, not knowing what he was doing.

A small, tinny voice focused his jumbled attention.

The phone. He picked it up and listened. “Hello, do need assistance?”

Nathan hung up.

The dispatcher would have heard the gunshot. *Time to get the fuck outta Dodge.*

He made for the exit, but as he reached for the handle, someone on the other side knocked three times. Nathan stopped himself at the last instant, his hand hovering over the handle.

*Shit! Oh shit!* No way was it the police already. He moved his ear closer to the paneling and listened. His hand tightened into a fist, the leather creaking.

Three louder knocks. His heart misfired.

He crept over to the window and peeked around the drapes. Four little kids dressed in full Halloween regalia gathered around the door. One of them stepped up and knocked again.

*Can’t you see there’s nobody home you little shits? Get the hell out of here so I can get the hell out of here. What are little kids doing out on their own at this time of night anyway?*

Seymour’s body jerked and shifted.

## Halloween Eddie's

Nathan screamed and whirled around, sweeping a small bowl of sweets off the decorative stand by the door. The bowl hit the floor and cracked in half, the cellophane wrapped candy scattering color across the carpet.

The kids giggled and knocked again. "Come on, Halloween Eddie," they called, "we know you're in there - *TRICK OR TREAT?*"

Nathan rubbed a hand over his sweaty mouth, his gaze never leaving the corpse. One of the kids thumped the door continuously. They weren't going to leave now, not when they thought 'Eddie' was playing games with them.

The only other way out was through the shop, but that would be all locked up. If he didn't act quickly he was going to get caught red-handed.

His feverish eyes scanned the candy. He still had his mask and cape. Maybe he could open the door, shove some sweets into their hands and they'd be happy and leave. Or maybe he should just shove past them and run for it before it was too late.

He worked the mask back down over his face and scooped up some sweets. Opening the door a crack, he peeped out. A bar of light fell across the faces of the four kids.

The last thought Nathan had before the door burst into his face was, "Jeez, those are good masks."

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Groggily, Nathan looked up. He was on the floor with his back against the sofa. The devil mask lay beside him, the rubber shredded. His face ached where the door had slammed into it.

Standing in a semi-circle around him were what appeared to be four little kids, except these kids had the faces of wizened old men. They stared impassively at him with milky gray eyes, blue-veined hands hanging by their sides, and wispy white hair dangling from their liver-spotted heads.

The sight of the hideous little creatures brought Nathan fully to his senses. "What the fuck are you? What do you want?"

The heavy gaze of one wizened little man drifted to Seymour's corpse. *It is a night for evil deeds*, he said.

Nathan heard the voice in his head - none of the little men uttered a word.

*You have taken human life on this evil night, Nathan. Now you must choose.*

"Choose?"

## Alan I'Anson

*A trick...or a treat.*

“What?”

*The question is simple enough,* said the wizened little man. *Do you choose a trick or treat?*

Nathan swallowed, but the walls of his throat were glued together. “Why do I have to choose? What happens then?”

*Time is short, Nathan. Choose quickly now.*

“No!” Nathan cried. “You choose this!”

He yanked the gun from his pocket and pumped the trigger until the slider locked out. But nothing happened. No slugs hit the little men, nor did they punch the wall or kick splinters from the door behind them. He might as well have fired blanks.

The wizened little men stared impassively at him through a haze of drifting gun smoke.

“Oh shit,” Nathan whispered and let the pistol slip from his grasp.

*Now you have that out of your system,* said little man, *you must choose a trick or a treat. Choose a trick and we must do something to you. Choose a treat, and we must take something from you.*

Nathan’s mind tumbled. Trick or treat? Treat or trick? Which would be the lesser of two evils?

If he chose a trick, what might they do to him? He looked at the little creatures with their ancient, wrinkled faces. What could they do? Hurt him? Torture him?

And if he chose a treat, what might they take? A limb? His sight? Nathan’s heart quickened. Could they take his *mother* or one of his *sisters*?

*What about his soul?*

Nathan had heard such stories - demons taking your soul and damning you to an eternity of pain and torment.

Suddenly the light dimmed and the little men loomed over him, their bony hands curled into horrid claws, their faces screaming, their mouths crammed with teeth like jagged bits of shrapnel plunged into pink, bloody gums.

*Choose now, Nathan! Lest we choose for you.*

Nathan buried his face in his knees. “Trick! I choose a trick!”

When he looked up again, the wizened little men stood as they had before, teeth and claws gone, faces blank and impassive.

*You chose well, Nathan, for if you had chosen a treat, we would have taken your soul. Our treat would have been your eternal damnation.*

Nathan’s eyes widened.

However, you chose a trick.

The little man’s head tilted slightly, as if considering what trick he

## Halloween Eddie's

might play.

Nathan held his breath.

How would you feel if we made it so that Seymour wasn't dead anymore?

"What?"

*How would you feel if we made it so that Seymour wasn't dead anymore?*

Nathan blinked. *That was a trick?* He almost sighed with relief. But of course it was a trick...a *magic* trick. The little man said he had chosen well, and he had! If Seymour were alive, Nathan could fix everything else. If he were lucky, Seymour might not remember anything at all.

"I'd like that trick," Nathan said. "I'd like it a lot."

The four wizened little men bowed, the wisps of hair dangling from their heads.

*Then it is so.*

Silently, they turned on their stubbly little legs and shuffled out, closing the door behind them with a soft click.

Nathan waited, his eyes flicking between the door and Seymour's corpse.

*Had they really gone?*

The shopkeeper still lay dead. *How long might it take for it to work? Was resurrection an easy trick for those creatures?*

Seymour coughed and shuddered and clawed at the carpet.

Nathan drew a breath and held it.

The flap of skull still hung there. *Surely they would fix that too?*

Seymour gagged and choked and coughed up the plug of congealed blood sitting in his throat. His head jerked and he heaved out a wad of gore that hit the carpet and split into clinging strings of thick red jelly.

His eyes opened and scanned the ceiling and walls as if he'd never seen them before. His irises shone pure white like a cat down a dark alleyway. Slowly, he began to sit up, his body blocking the lamp and casting an immense shadow that seemed to swallow the room. His jaw worked, a guttural snarl rising from somewhere deep in the back of his throat.

Nathan got to his knees. He knew what was going on here. He'd seen this shit in movies like *Dawn of the Dead*.

"Oh, good trick," Nathan whispered as he slowly eased himself away. "You didn't make him alive, did you? You just made him *undead*. Very clever."

Seymour's silvery gaze fell on Nathan, focusing and narrowing.

"But not *that* clever," Nathan said. "Cause you forgot I can run, man, I can run like the fucking wind."

## Alan I'Anson

Seymour's lips stripped back from his blood-clotted teeth and he made a sudden screaming lurch toward him.

Nathan bolted for the door and yanked it open.

*But we never said that making Seymour undead was the trick, Nathan, we just asked how you would feel about it.*

Nathan stood on the threshold, his mouth agape and his eyes pinned wide. The doorway was completely bricked up, just like all the other exits in the small dark room.

As Seymour closed in, Nathan heard the wizened little man chuckle.

*There's the trick,* he said.



# Pumpkin Art

Dan Foley

**“Ellen, did you know that carving pumpkins is an art? Most people don’t know that, but it really is. Not that phony carving where they draw a picture on the skin and then just gouge out the pattern a quarter-inch deep—hell, anybody that can draw could do that. No, I mean real pumpkin carving where you empty out the pumpkin and scrape it clean and carve something on it. And the actual carving is just part of the job. I know, because pumpkin carving is my life.**

“A real artist like myself should control every step in the creation of his art. That’s the only way to assure quality. All true artists know that. I even insist on growing my own pumpkins. I’ve developed my own strain that is far superior to anything available commercially. Since I’ve been using them, I’ve elevated my work to a much higher level, if I do say so myself.

## Dan Foley

“I’ve developed two basic shapes of pumpkins, the classic round one favored by card companies and school children, and an oval one suitable for longer, vertical pieces. I don’t have a preference; instead I let the work itself determine which type I use. The longer ones allow me to create more sinister faces and things like hangmen’s trees or full-length figures. For happy faces or whimsical pieces the round ones seem to work better.

“Each pumpkin has a personality of its own, you know—some are quite happy and carefree, others can be moody. I don’t judge, though, I just accept them for what they are. Later, when I carve them, I match my carving to each one’s personality. The one I’ve picked out for you is petite and quite cute, just like you.

“Summer is a hard time for me. Not because of all the work, but because it’s like waiting for the birth of a child. I watch as the plants develop leaves, send out runners, and finally put forth their delicate, orange blossoms. When the blossoms finally produce fruit, I only leave one on each vine. I’m not interested in volume; instead I want each plant to put all its nourishment in that single, perfect, pumpkin. I can’t tell you how hard it is to pick only one fruit knowing I’m killing the rest. I feel like a parent forced to sacrifice one child to save another. It has to be done though, so I do make the sacrifice, no matter how much it hurts.

“I really get excited in late September when the weather finally turns cool and the maple leaves are ablaze with color. That’s when I harvest my orange jewels, the canvasses I will use to create my masterpieces. I cut each stem exactly five inches from the pumpkin. This leaves me enough to work with later on.

“You might think I’d be ready to start carving at this point, but you’d be wrong. I still have tons to do. Before I can even think of making the first cut, I have to prepare my tools. A fillet knife for the lid, a jeweler’s saw for the fine work, a small wooden pick to outline the design, two scrapers—one large, one small—to clean the cavity, and finally a pocketknife to carve the stem. Look how sharp the blade on the fillet knife is; it’s like a razor—I could shave with it.

“I carve my darlings in the order of their complexity, completing the easier ones first. By carving them in this order, I prepare myself for the really intricate designs. By the way, yours is the most complex piece I’ve ever attempted. And I’m not just saying that to impress you.

“I start by cutting the lid. I prefer a perfect pentagram, which is fitting considering they are a Halloween decoration and Halloween is a special time for witches and demons. You can’t believe how satisfying it is to finally slip the point of my knife into the flesh of one of my pumpkins. It’s like striking the first note on a beautiful instrument you

## Pumpkin Art

have created from scratch.

“Once I have the lid out, I cut a notch in each side of the pentagram to allow the heat and smoke from the candle that will eventually reside in the cavity to be released. I’m sure you know how important a vent hole is. Without a vent, the inside of the cavity, especially the lid, would burn and be stained with soot. So any pumpkin that’s going to have a candle in it has to have a vent. Some people cheat and put a small light bulb inside, but then the art loses all its aesthetic value. It’s the flickering flame of the candle that gives life to the whole piece. That’s why I think judging should include viewing the entrants in the dark as well as the light. Rest assured, Ellen, your pumpkin will have a candle. Nothing but the best will do for you.

“Once the lid has been cut and set aside, I carefully remove the internals. Most people dislike this part, but I revel in it. It’s so intimate, so personal, like placing my hands inside a lover’s body. The soft, slippery pulp, the tougher strands that are really umbilical cords for the seeds, and the seeds themselves, hard like teeth or bits of bone. Before I remove the first handful I squeeze it, caress it, feel its wetness slip between my fingers, clinging to my hand, coating me with its essence. I scoop it out, ripping it from the body of the pumpkin, feeling its resistance, overcoming it. I raise it to my face, breathe in its sweet aroma, taste its distinct flavor, savoring it on my tongue.

“With the pulp removed, the cavity is ready for scraping. Just as all the fat must be removed from a skin being tanned, all traces of pulp must be removed from the inside of the shell. If I don’t eliminate it all, the pumpkin will rot. I couldn’t stand the thought of one of my creations rotting from the inside while the outside is still so beautiful. I know you’ll appreciate that.

“See these scrapers? I use the big one first to clean most of the shell. The small one is for cleanup. When I’m done, the inside is as smooth as a baby’s skin. I even use a mirror to make sure I haven’t missed anything.

“Now I’m almost ready to start carving. Only one more step has to be completed, but it’s an important one—I have to copy the design pattern from my drawing to the pumpkin. I labor over my designs, spending hours on each one to get every detail just right. If anything is wrong, I’ll throw it out and start over. Do you realize I had to do the design for your pumpkin three times before I was satisfied with it? It had to be perfect to match your beauty.

“Once I have the design completed, I transfer it to a template. I actually use a dummy pumpkin for this, much like a seamstress using a dress form to make sure the clothes she’s making will fit right. I have to

## Dan Foley

do this because the perspective from a flat picture distorts when it's applied to a rounded surface. By using the dummy, I know the design will transfer properly to the real thing.

"Only now, after all these things have been completed, am I'm ready to press my pick into the pumpkin's flesh. My hand actually trembles in anticipation at this point, but I overcome that. When I finally insert the pick I do it gently but firmly. I don't want to cause any undue damage to any of my darlings. The first thrust is the most rewarding—the outer skin resists penetration but only for a second, then the shaft enters and passes all the way through the shell into the cavity. I repeat this process over and over, making a complete penetration every half-inch, but I prick the skin every quarter-inch to define the pattern.

"After the entire design has been outlined, I use my jeweler's saw to cut it out. This part is a labor of love and extremely critical; it usually takes me several hours to complete it. One slip, one mistake, and all my efforts will have been for nothing. Each stroke with the saw must be firm enough to cut, but slow enough not to rip the skin. I often pause between strokes to admire my work. If I'm creating an especially intricate pattern like yours, where very thin sections of the shell have to stay intact, it takes me even longer.

"When the carving on the pumpkin is complete, I start on the stem. It's always different from the pumpkin, but related. Take the pumpkin I entered in last year's contest for example. On that one I had carved a skeleton holding a scythe. I turned the stem into a bundle of wheat. Of course, yours won't need a stem, will it?

"Ellen, do you know why I'm telling you all of this? It's because I wanted you and the other judges to understand why I was so upset when I didn't win that contest. I've won every other pumpkin carving contest I've ever entered. Every one! I take pride in that. And then you and those other fools awarded the ribbon to that twit of a high school girl who used one of those new pumpkin carving kits they sell at Wal-Mart for Christ's sake. And what was the carving? A big spider copied right out of the book that came with the kit. How could you do that? How could you be so unfair? Do you have any idea how much that hurt me? Do you even care? I think not.

"Do you know what else? I've discovered I enjoy talking while I work, and I wanted you to appreciate the creation I'm making just for you. See, yours is a cat perched on a skull. Look at the detail; you can even see the cat's whiskers. I'll bet that little twit Carolyn couldn't create something like this. I selected this design for you because you love cats and you were on the advisory board for the new cemetery. Isn't that great? A bit ironic too, I must admit.

## Pumpkin Art

“Picking your design was easy; Bill Jannis, on the other hand, was a bitch. I started with a set of teeth, because he’s a dentist, but they were just too easy. I finally settled on a dentist working on a patient in his chair. Reverend Blake got a trout jumping out of a lake because he loves to fish. Annie Green got two gorgeous hummingbirds at a feeder because she’s such an avid bird watcher. That twit, Carolyn ‘First Place’ Duffy, got a great spider, web and all. If she had carved something like that, she might have deserved to win. But she didn’t, and she won anyway. I just don’t understand it.

“Did you see the others on their crosses in the back yard when I carried you in? I hope so because I want you to know how good you’ll look when you join them. I know you couldn’t get the full effect because I haven’t lit the candles yet, but you can use your imagination. Can’t you?

“There, your pumpkin is finally done. What do you think of it? Is it everything I said it would be? Just nod Ellen, I’ll understand. No? Well, you didn’t like last year’s effort either, did you? That’s all right. I’m sure everyone else will like it, even if you don’t.

“Now, since you won’t be around for much more of this, let me tell you what comes next. I’m going to use this fillet knife to cut you open from your sternum to your crotch. Then I’m going to clean you out just as carefully as I would one of my pumpkins. After all, since you’re going to be part of this masterpiece I don’t want you thinking I’d treat you with any less respect than any of my other creations.

“Oh, and don’t worry about your parts—I won’t mix them with anyone else’s. I’m going to put them in this big jar with all the parts from your pumpkin. I did that for everybody, even the twit. See, it already has your name on it. Another thing you don’t have to worry about is crosses, they’re all the same size—seven feet tall with four foot cross pieces—no inequalities here. I’ve got spikes for your hands—well wrists actually—because you really can’t put them through the hands because they rip out. I discovered that when I mounted Reverend Blake. Now that was truly ironic.

“Once you’re completely cleaned, I’ll mount you on your cross next to everyone else. You’ll all be arranged in a circle like the Knights of the Round Table so no one has to feel they are less important than anyone else. Then, after you’re safely up there, I’ll place your pumpkin in your belly. I may have to cut a few ribs, but I’ll try not to. That’s why I selected a smaller pumpkin in your case—I didn’t want to disfigure you. You don’t have to be concerned about your pumpkin falling out, either, because the pelvic bones make a perfect mounting pedestal. I’ll wait until everything is in place before I trim the skin around the pumpkin. It

## Dan Foley

makes for a better presentation. And, just to make sure your pumpkin doesn't shift, I'll pin it in place with a few hatpins. I thought of using a staple gun but that seemed a bit excessive. Don't you agree?

"Now here's the neat part. Before I light your candle, I'll insert this PVC tube up through your esophagus, all the way to the back of your throat. Then I'll cement it to the ninety-degree elbow on this piece of tubing that I'll insert through your mouth. That will accomplish two things: it will hold your head up so you don't look like you're ashamed of yourself, and it will provide that all-important vent for the candle. Isn't that great? Let me tell you, it took me a while to solve that problem.

"Now, when all that is done, I'll light your candle. You're going to be my final masterpiece, the jewel in my Halloween diorama. I hope you appreciate the honor. I saved you for last because I didn't think the others would.

"Now, Ellen, one last thing before I start. Try and hold still if you can, because if you thrash around too much the knife could slip and I'd wind up cutting you more than I have to. Bill Janis did that and his incision looks just terrible.

"You might want to look away because I'm going to start now. It might hurt a bit, but not for long. Goodbye, Ellen."



# The Whispers

Kurt Newton

**The whispers came from miles around.** Over dark barren fields and gray ghost woods. Across cold water ponds and leaf-clogged streams. Like a wind swarm they flew, down long winding roads during the hours of night when all in town were asleep.

Except for one boy, who lay awake in his bed, eyes wide and glistening; a stillness surrounding his thoughts like a pillow as soft as snow and as cold as ice. A window left cracked, but a crack for a breeze is all that it needs. And in on the breeze came a body of voices as old as the sun and the moon and the stars. As old as death. As old as night. And the whispers came circling around the boy's head...and found their way in.

"Jeremy, wake up."

## Kurt Newton

A warm face hovered, a nudge at his shoulder.

"Are you feeling all right? You're skin feels cold and you've lost your color. You better stay home."

Jeremy realized one thing, the only thing that mattered. "But it's Halloween, Mom. I can't be sick. I can't miss it this year. It just wouldn't be right."

His mother smiled with a motherly love. "School first, okay? And if you're feeling better, we'll see about tonight."

And, for Jeremy, the night couldn't arrive fast enough. All day long as the teachers talked and dragged their chalks, the whispers inside were playing games with his thoughts. At lunchtime, his classmates jibbered and jabbered about costumes and masks and pumpkins and treats. But Jeremy knew more. The whispers had plenty of surprises in store for all the town's people once the sun hit the trees. This Halloween night would be like no other.

To test his theory, Jeremy whispered a thought and Big Brad the Bully got down on all fours and began to bark. His mouth began foaming and his eyes turned white. And everyone laughed until Brad took a bite out of the vice principal's leg.

Jeremy couldn't help but feel special inside, despite all the blood and the noise and the rush when the ambulance came.

And all the way home, as the October sun sank like a fire-lit stone in the sky, the whispers were stirring, each moth-winged voice beating a flurry of thoughts, of trick-or-treat pranks and trick-or-treat schemes and trick-or-treat games to be wrought on the evening.

Jeremy's mom had a superman costume laid out on the bed and one of those fake plastic faces with the rubber band in the back. Jeremy took one look and nearly lost his breath. The whispers hitched and coughed and nearly choked in his chest.

"That's all right, Mom, I feel different tonight. I think I'll just wear your sunglasses and one of Dad's winter caps, and my old black jacket and I'll slick my hair back."

His mom made a face like "Not on your life", but Jeremy thought her a new thought and his mom quickly replied, "All right, Jeremy, whatever you like is just fine."

And so Jeremy, dressed in his new Halloween clothes, passed over the plastic ghost candy bucket his mom had bought at the store, and grabbed a pillow case from his pillow instead, and stepped out into the cool autumn night with a grin on his face and the lick of invisible tongues in his chest. He may have been on his own but he wasn't alone.

## The Whispers

First stop—his neighbors, the Westfield's, who he never did like, with their annoying white-toothed smiles and their brand new bikes and their Disney World vacations and their ergonomically designed backpacks to carry their school books to school so their backs wouldn't ache. There had to be something special he could whisper that would fix them all up just right.

And a thought came like a winter wind out of the north, and covered the Westfield's home with snow and ice. Now Mr. and Mrs. Westfield stood perfectly still on their perfect doorstep with their platter of Swiss chocolates and bottled spring water from the Swiss Alps all frozen up tight. And Jeremy's chest filled with laughter as he moved on to the next house.

From the Jefferson's to the Jones' to the Kelly's to the Kline's, Jeremy went door to door handing out whispers like candy treats, only not as kind or not as sweet. From scary witch costumes that would never come off, to goblin door knockers that let no one in or no one get out, to popcorn balls that turned into mice, the whispers were busy deep into the night. And Jeremy tricked and tricked until he came to the door of the mysteriously strange and eccentric Mr. Grimaldi—simply Grim to most—who, it was said, spent hours upon hours late into the night in his basement laboratory inventing inventions that nobody would buy.

But when Jeremy knocked and the door opened wide, it was Grim who seemed to cast the first spell. With a wave of his hand Jeremy's eyelids grew heavy and the whispers inside settled like leaves on the floor of his tummy. And when he woke up he was strapped to a chair, Grim studying him with a very large magnifying glass.

"I knew someone had to have them; I could feel it in the air," said Grim. "But I fell asleep before the whispering time came." He gripped Jeremy by the throat with one black leather-gloved hand and squeezed tight. "Now, open your mouth and give me what's mine!" A large open jar hovered just inches from Jeremy's lips.

Jeremy glanced once around and saw the leather bound books with the strange symbols on their thick leather spines, and the jars full of things with names on their labels that he couldn't pronounce. This was no lab for inventing new things, but a den of black magic for bringing forth what no person should ever think to bring.

Grim growled. "The clock is ticking, young man, so make up your mind! Alive or dead, it really makes no difference to me," he said. But behind the wild eyes and beneath the disheveled hair, Jeremy could see there was a hint of desperation, as if he too were scared. "Just say the word and the whispers will go. Then I can set you free and you'll be on your way home."

And what happened next was a mystery to both. The jar Grim held began to glow. It grew so hot, it burned a hole through his glove and, with a curse on his luck, he had to let go. And as the jar crashed to the floor, Jeremy could feel them inside, the whispers lining up one behind one getting ready to fly.

When Grim turned his back and reached around for another of his magical capturing jars, the whispers rose like smoke from Jeremy's throat and gathered near the ceiling and turned black like a cloud. Thunder shook the room and lightning zapped until each jar on each shelf was irreparably cracked.

"No!" shouted Grim at the top of his lungs. "I've spent years conjuring and capturing each one!" But the whispers only rumbled louder still, until each jar was broken and their insides were spilled. And the only window that looked out into the cool autumn night had been dutifully shattered into a dozen diamond shape pieces.

And as the things with the names none could pronounce gathered themselves and fled, Grim held his nose and opened his mouth and sucked the whispers in.

But the whispers were as old as the sun and the moon and the stars. As old as death. As old as night. If truth be told then they were the lie. And if everything beautiful has its ugly side, then they were that side. In fact, they were responsible for being the opposite of everything in life. So when Grim sucked them in, it turned him not into somebody more meaner than mean but somebody nice.

Jeremy sat and watched the whole thing, scared as a ghost who has lost his sheet. He didn't remember a single thing from the time in his bed when the whispers first came and entered his head to this very moment and everything in between.

"How did I get here?" Jeremy asked the strange man with the smile on his face and the broken glass at his feet.

"I'm sorry, young man, there has been some kind of mistake. Let me take you home, and if your parents have questions I'll be glad to explain."

And from that day forward Mr. Grimaldi was the nicest most kindest man in town. He began inventing things that only brought smiles to each child's mouth.

And Jeremy—well, that is quite another story indeed. You see, Jeremy began wondering about the sun and the moon and the stars, and things like death and what lurks in the night. He claimed he had once had a dream about these things called "whispers" that every once in a great while on Halloween's eve come down from the sky and float over fields and woods and streams and into a town that is all but asleep...except maybe for one.

## The Whispers

And that's where the story reaches its end. And maybe for some that would be enough. But not for Jeremy.

Because every year, when Halloween comes, now matter how old he gets, he still sits up awake in his bed, afraid to sleep, the window cracked, waiting for that special Autumn breeze to bring the whispers back.

## **A Demon's Treat** **Carol MacAllister**

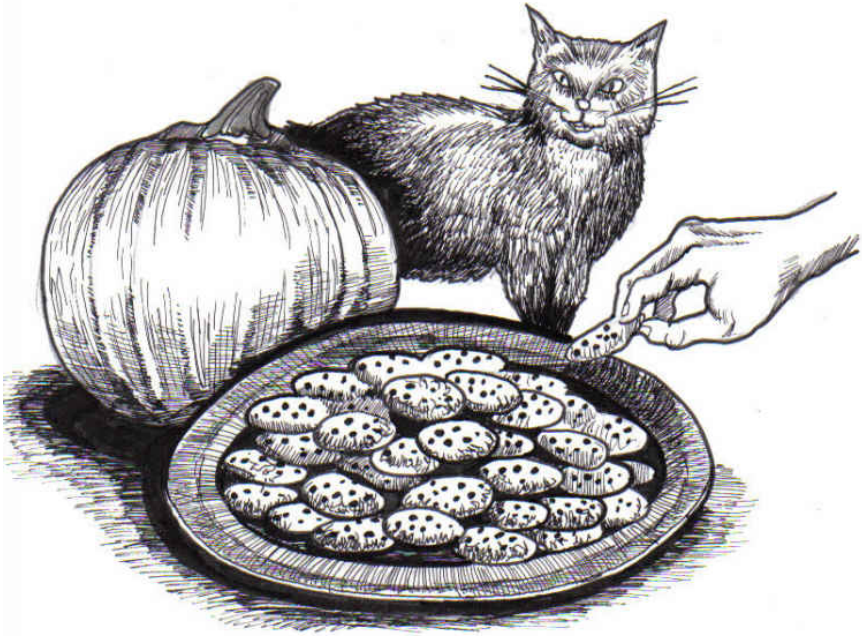
Fresh newt's eyes and frog legs flinch  
while boiling in the brew,  
Spells are cast on howling winds,  
Their darts a trick or two.

Trouble lurks at every turn,  
unknowing victims race  
from moaning dead, banshee cries,  
monster's snarling chase.

Autumn's rustling branches drone  
at demons overhead  
on ancient brooms, phantom steeds,  
Rousing up the dead.

Strange, how innocence is lured  
to wander through dark streets,  
Each year, a few just disappear,  
Snatched!—a demon's treat.





# The Cat Lady Does Halloween

Elizabeth Blue

**As soon as darkness fell, the hordes of trick or treaters poured forth from their houses, dressed as witches and ghosts, ninjas and pirates. In the Cat Lady's neighborhood, there were many children, but most of them didn't dare approach her door.**

She always bought candy for them anyway, hoping they would come. For years, Halloween came and went, and the Cat Lady was left with a full bowl of candy, which she always threw out. It was nothing she would eat—chocolate bars and peanut butter cups. She bought these things because she knew it was what the children liked. It was the same sort of stuff she had liked as a child so long ago.

## Elizabeth Blue

She never kept chocolate in the house anymore. Cats couldn't have chocolate, and the Cat Lady, not wanting to offend, never ate chocolate in front of her babies.

But she bought other candy for the cats. They loved it. Candy corn, chopped up into tiny pieces, and taffy, which she held in her hand for the cats to lick. It was a time-consuming task to give all twenty-five cats a turn, but the Cat Lady didn't mind. She felt it was their right, as cats, to have a treat on their favorite holiday.

This year, like each year before, the Cat Lady sat on her porch with the bowl of candy beside her black, wrought iron rocker. She watched the children as they passed by her house. She knew why they didn't stop. She looked scary to them; her big, brick house with its dark windows as her backdrop, the one light on the porch illuminating features she had come to think of as gaunt. But she hoped, despite the appearance, just once someone would come.

Bijou sat in her lap, which only added to the fearsome scene. Bijou was a big, black cat, the largest she had. He weighed a little over twenty pounds. His emerald green eyes glowed, she hoped, whenever someone glanced their way.

As much as she wanted the children to come take her candy, she didn't want all of them. Only those worthy, brave enough to come up her walk. So she did nothing to make herself or her house look friendly. Halloween wasn't about looking friendly.

Soon after the grandfather clock inside the house chimed eight, the Cat Lady stood, preparing to go back inside and dump out the candy, having given away not a single piece. Before she reached the door, the glow of two flashlights came around the corner. She held her breath and stroked Bijou. Bijou purred and looked out into the night. The Cat Lady's pulse quickened as the flashlights, followed by two older children, stopped in front of her house. She heard whispers. Bijou tensed in her arms. She sat back in her rocker, hoping the children would decide to come get some candy from her.

A moment later, the two children, boys she noticed, turned from the street and started up her sidewalk. The Cat Lady smiled.

They were much older than they had looked from the street. Teenagers. Her smile faded when she saw neither of them wore a costume.

They walked slowly, avoiding her stare.

Bijou growled, and the Cat Lady felt the vibration of it in her lap.

"Hush, Bijou," she whispered to him.

He grumbled at her and shifted in her lap. Hillberry, who had been sitting in the shadows all evening on the outer windowsill hissed. Little

## The Cat Lady Does Halloween

Snuggly stood up in the corner of the porch, aroused from her nap, and arched her back and reached out both front paws, stretching her whole body. Her claws poked out, and she scraped them on the cement porch as she drew her legs back in, tucked them under herself and lay back down, eyeing the teenagers as they walked up the steps. Gingerfat, who lay under the rocker, tail tucked in for safety, meowed a greeting to the children.

“What are you two supposed to be?” asked the Cat Lady.

They stopped halfway up the steps of the porch.

“We’re, uh, we’re vampires,” the boy on the left replied.

“I see. Vampires. You don’t look like vampires to me,” said the Cat Lady. Gingerfat meowed in agreement.

The boy on the right said, “Well, vampires look different nowadays. We’ve got to fit in, you know, with regular society.” He nudged the boy on the left with his elbow.

The boy on the left nodded. “Yeah, you can’t just go around wearing a cape and a black suit anymore.”

*Little idiots*, the Cat Lady thought. “Bijou, I think the boys are trying to frighten us!” She laughed.

Bijou licked his lips as if he had just finished a tasty meal. Or was anticipating one.

“Well, it’s Halloween, isn’t it?” said the boy on the left.

“Yeah. Maybe you should be afraid,” said the boy on the right. “Our kind are out all over the place tonight. It’s probably not a good idea for you to be out here with your cats and all.”

“Oh?” said the Cat Lady.

“Yep,” said the boy on the right.

She thought he was definitely the uglier of the two. She wondered what had happened to all the polite boys in the world. Children had manners when she was growing up.

“Well, did you come here for something, Vampires?”

“Oh, yeah. Trick or treat,” said the boy on the left.

“Trick or treat,” said the boy on the right.

The Cat Lady looked at them for a moment, then said, “I didn’t think vampires could eat candy.”

“That’s just a myth,” said the boy on the right.

“I see.” She stood up and placed Bijou on the porch. “Wait here. I have something special in the house, better than this candy out here. Something a couple of vampires like you might enjoy.”

She went to the door. “Mind the cats. They don’t take kindly to vampires, and they’ve done their own share of blood sucking.” She snickered as she went into the house. Part of her hoped she would come

## Elizabeth Blue

back to the porch to find the boys shredded to bits, but she also hoped she would have the opportunity to try out her new Halloween cookie recipe on them.

*The little smart-asses*, she thought. Not only did it annoy her that teenagers had the audacity to trick or treat, but they hadn't even bothered to put on a costume! They were definitely not candy-worthy. But cookie-worthy, they were. She went to the stove and carefully took several cookies from the cookie sheet, taking care not to break off any of the black tails, heads or paws. She placed them into two plastic bags and sealed them.

She returned to the porch to find the boys standing at the base of the steps. The cats outside had moved to the edge of the top step, sitting side by side, glaring at the boys.

"What good cats I have, don't you think, Vampires?"

The boys nodded.

She handed each of them a plastic bag with cookies. "Enjoy!" she said.

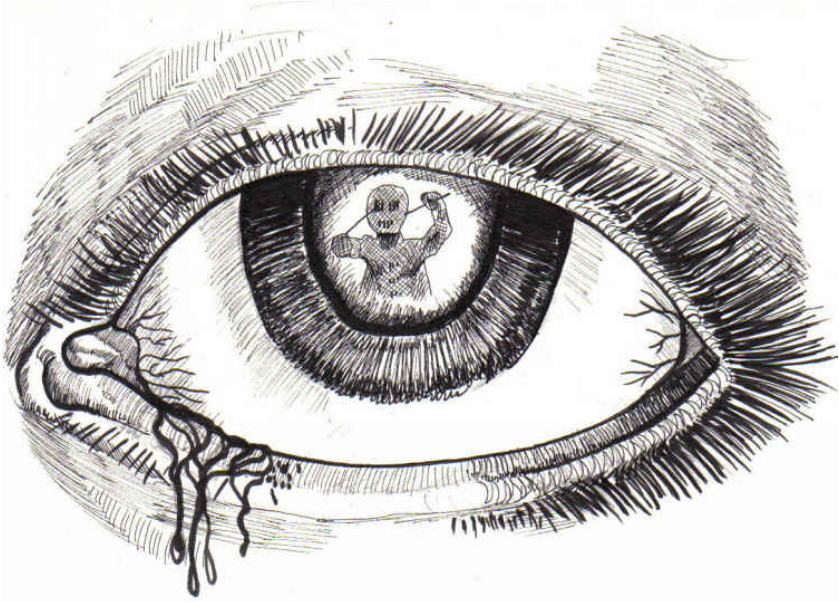
The boys backed away, eyeing their treats with disdain, then they turned away more quickly than they had come.

When she couldn't see their flashlights anymore, the Cat Lady held the front door open and called the cats inside. She carried her bowl of candy and tossed it all in the trash.

She promptly went to bed after reading the cats their bedtime story because she wanted to be up early the next morning.

She slept well, kept warm in her bed by cats snuggled against her legs and feet, and she awoke refreshed at 7:30. When the grandfather clock chimed eight times she went to her front window and looked out at the children waiting for the high school bus.

Three, four, five of them, she counted. She clapped her hands together, tickled to find two children missing from the group. She went to the kitchen, opened her recipe book and marked the Halloween Cookie recipe a success.



# Well, Aren't You Terrifying

William D. Carl

**Martha was surprised when she opened the door** to find a child-sized voodoo doll standing on her front porch, mitten-like hands extended, clutching a trick or treats pillow case.

She shouldn't have been so startled; it *was* Halloween, her favorite holiday. Every year, she carefully chose a costume to wear when handing out candy to the children (only one per kiddie, because she didn't want to be blamed for latter-day cavities). She would darken the lights and put the old Disney Haunted Mansion sound effects record on the stereo. Then, she would spend her lonely evening passing out treats and pretending that some of the children were her own.

On holidays, the empty house seemed even emptier, as vast and as

desolate as her womb before Jimmy had left her for that bitch check-out girl at the Piggly Wiggly. The void he had left behind had dominated her house for the past twenty years, so she was thrilled any time she could fill that abyss with the sounds of cats screeching and ghosts moaning, with little children dressed as vampires or princesses or hobos.

Even if it was only for the evening. It was enough. For a while.

She had been leaning back in her chair, satisfied with this Halloween's trick or treat turnout. It was nearly ten-o'clock, so the little ones were all at home, counting out their booty, when she heard the doorbell ring. Figuring it was a straggler, she grabbed her plastic pumpkin that was full of bite-sized candy bars and opened the door.

"Trick or treat," said the voodoo doll.

The child was encased entirely in brown burlap, completely sewn into his (her?) costume with red yarn. Its burlap face consisted of eyes made up of two cross-stitched X's and a straight line of yarn represented a mouth. Large pins, the size of knitting needles, were stuck haphazardly through the burlap in various places. There were no air holes in the heavy fabric, and Martha wondered how the poor child could breathe. Looking around her dimly lit front porch, she didn't see any parents, only her neighbors' open doors. The kid was short enough to be quite young, too young to be out on its own.

"Well," she said. "Aren't you terrifying? Where's your mommy and daddy?"

In answer, the voodoo doll raised the pillowcase higher, and Martha could see it bulging at the seams with various goodies. The kid had made a real haul tonight.

"Trick or treat," the doll reiterated, a little stronger this time.

"Oh, all right then. Here you go."

Martha dropped a single candy bar into the pillowcase and took a step back into her doorway. The doll looked down at the stash, then, unsatisfied, held the pillowcase back up to her.

The plump woman placed her hands on her hips, looking down her street at all the gaping doorways. It was odd that they were all left wide open, even if trick-or-treaters were expected. She thought she saw a leg sticking out of old Mr. Krapshaw's front door, a red slipper dangling cock-eyed over the toes.

"Trick or treat," came the angry voice of the doll, distorted by the burlap.

"Don't be a greedy-guts," Martha snapped, her eyes focused on the cul-de-sac that culminated with her small ranch house. So many open doors, all of them, so that anyone could walk right into the houses. It wasn't at all like her neighbors, who were generally a private bunch.

## Well, Aren't You Terrifying

She was startled by the sound of the pillowcase being dropped at her feet, the top open and brimming with candy. She saw at least a dozen Milky Ways, two-dozen caramels, three-dozen tootsie rolls. Each of the brands of candy the child possessed was in bulk, as if each household had given their entire supply of treats to this horrid little doll. As she watched, the kid removed one of the giant pins from its abdomen. It gleamed beneath her porch light, sharper than anything a child should be playing with.

"I said no," she answered, her gaze returning to that single red slipper, so out of place in the night. "Each child gets one candy bar. That's my rule."

The voodoo doll plunged the pin into its right arm until it came out the other side.

Martha clutched her right bicep, the pain almost unbearable. It felt exactly as though a knife were being thrust through her flesh. Then, just as abruptly, the pain was gone.

Glancing down at the thing on her doorstep, she saw it had removed the needle from its arm. It gazed up at her with its X-sewn eyes and the neutral yarn mouth.

"You...did you..."

The doll stuck itself in its stomach, ramming the monstrous pin deep into its gut. Martha collapsed onto the porch, dropping her plastic pumpkin, which spewed Snickers bars across the painted wood. Her head struck the swing, and it rocked, casting moving shadows across the hideous doll's face. The stitched mouth seemed to move, shift into a smile. With a single tug, the doll pulled out the pin, brandishing it in front of itself.

Relieved of the agony in her stomach, Martha fell back against her opened door.

And she realized why there were so many other doors left gaping wide, leaving a trail of empty houses ending in her little ranch. The image of the red slipper, so distinct against the shadows of night, was another clue.

This child—this *creature*—was trick-or-treating its way down the street, and her house was, by a geographic luck of the draw, the last to be visited. How many other roads had it traveled? How many other victims were laying dead in their doorways?

The doll raised the spike so it was pointed directly at its forehead. Something inside the burlap shifted, wriggled, like there were many small animals trapped within the thing...snakes or insects.

"No," Martha pleaded, trying to grasp the lethal pin. "No, you can have it all...all the candy. I don't care. Take it all."

## William D. Carl

The voodoo doll paused, wavered a bit. It seemed to be eyeing the spilled goodies from her plastic pumpkin. Inside the house, the sound effects record started again from the beginning, a high-pitched shrieking, leading to a low moan.

Taking a few awkward steps towards Martha on soft, shoe-like feet, the effigy showed the pin to the sobbing woman. It was larger than she'd thought, nearly the size of a railway spike.

Then, it plunged the pin into its head, right between the X's that served as its eyes.

Martha trembled for a bit, as though suffering a mild epileptic fit, her feet on the porch, her head and body flopping into the doorway. When she stopped quivering, her eyes took on a fish-like glaze, and a single trail of crimson ran from her right eye—a bloody teardrop.

The doll reached down and scooped all the Snickers bars into its pillowcase, careful not to miss a single one. Tossing the pumpkin back into the house, it shuffled away from the porch, heading for the next cul-de-sac, the next full bag of candy.

There were hours yet until the dawn.



# The Dare

Jeff Allen

**It was a funny sight to witness**—a pack of black vampires chasing a white werewolf—well, not technically white. He still had brown fur and a brown face, but underneath it all, he was as white as a bar of Ivory soap. There was nothing funny to Eddie Zitzler (the werewolf) though. The only thought going through his mind in that minute was getting the hell out of there in one piece. He sprinted down a dark alleyway (a cramped, dirty passageway filled with broken crates, aluminum trashcans, and stray cats)—an option he would normally not entertain, but under the circumstances it looked like a feasible choice. He shot down that alley like a scared cat running from a rabid dog.

Why the hell was he here, anyway? *Those jackasses you call friends, that's why.* It all started with a dare—it always started with a dare. The past few Halloweens, he and his cronies would roam the streets at night, with no plan of action, but at some point in the evening someone would lay out the *dare*. Two years ago, it was Angelo who dared Rick to take a dump in a brown lunch bag and set it on fire, before dropping it onto Mr. Selena's doorstep and ringing the bell. They had scurried behind a shrub, peeking through the tattered foliage. When the door opened, there was Mr. Selena—all three hundred fifty pounds of him—screaming and swearing.

"Damn kids!" Up went the right leg with the slipper on the foot, and down it came like a sledgehammer—SPLAT!

"What the. . .you rats! You rotten hoodlums, I'll get you!" he'd scream as they hunkered in the shrubs biting their tongues and rolling on the grass.

The next year was hardly a dare. Matt challenged Rob to take a leak on Ms. Goodall's famed vegetable garden. Aside from her thirteen cats, the garden was her most prized possession. Last year she even gave green peppers and eggplant to trick or treaters on Halloween, wrapped neatly in those trick or treat bags with the witch and pumpkin on the front. Not much happened from Rob's watering. Her plants survived and went on to sprout more vegetables, which she'd generously hand out to her neighbors. Unwittingly, Rob's mother accepted a sprig of basil from Ms. Goodall for her pasta tomato-basil dish. Rob refused to eat it of course, but he smiled contentedly as his little pain-in-the-ass brother, Josh, ate two plates of pasta, licking each plate clean.

"We gotta up the stakes this year," Rick said.

"What do you have in mind?" Keith asked.

"Well, as I see it, we've been playing children's games up until now. This year I propose we set a real dare." His eyes widened. "This is what we are going to do. . .one of us will be dared to do something on Halloween night. If the chosen one accomplishes the task, each of us is going to chip in to buy him the new Xbox 360 when it comes out, plus a free meal at any restaurant of his choice."

Everyone agreed, excited at the prospect of getting a free Xbox. It sounded simple enough; after all, the dare couldn't be that bad. With the grand prize looming in the distance, the entire crew volunteered to be the point man. "I'm your guy," Matt said.

"It wouldn't be fair," Rick answered. "Of course we all want the Xbox, so instead of choosing which one of you will be dared, we will select by process of elimination. Sound fair?"

He opted for the tried and true favorite. Using his finger as a pointer,

## The Dare

he said, "Bubble gum, bubble gum, in a dish. . ." Pointing to a new head with each word, ". . .how many pieces do you wish?" His finger landed on Matt.

"Six," Matt said.

Rick continued, "S-I-X spells six and you are not it." The finger landed on Rick.

"Ha, guess I'm out." He continued. In the end, the finger landed on Eddie, who wore a thick victorious smile. That is until Rick gave him his assignment.

"No fucking way," he said.

"You only need to be there for thirty minutes. We'll drop you off; you ring a few doorbells, say trick or treat, collect your goodies and we'll pick you up thirty minutes later."

"Which part of no did you not understand?" Eddie asked.

"Don't be such a wuss," Matt chimed.

"Just so you happen to know, I read in Time magazine a few years ago that Newark is the top most unlivable city in the U.S. Not New Jersey, not Essex County, but all of the United States."

"You didn't think we were going to just *give* away the Xbox 360, did you?"

No, he supposed they wouldn't. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. His buddies would drop him off, and he would only need to trick or treat for thirty minutes.

"Call me on my cell if you can't complete the mission," Rick said. "We'll come pick you up."

Statistically speaking, how many murders were there in Newark each day? Probably none. What were the chances of him being murdered on Halloween? No doubt, children would be outside with their parents, trick or treating. Safety in numbers, right? The more he thought of it, the more he welcomed the challenge. It wouldn't be too bad at all. Just thirty minutes and then his ride would scoop him up and they'd go eat at a restaurant of his choice. And when the Xbox 360 launched, he'd be the first of his friends to get it.

"All right," he said, raising his hands in surrender. "I'll do it."

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And now here he was, a white boy on the mean streets of Newark, New Jersey, running from a gang of black guys dressed up as vampires. In light of the situation, he actually laughed as he thought of an old movie he once saw on video, called *Blacula*, about an African prince who turns into a vampire after being bitten by Dracula.

He ran past fleeting images of blinking skulls in windows; twisted scarecrows on front lawns; and grinning pumpkins on doorsteps, but where were the children? It was barely nine o'clock but there wasn't so much as one child on the street, trick or treating.

The old faded brownstones flanked the streets like malign sentinels. His heart pounded against his ribcage, ready to burst out like a Mexican jumping bean. He could feel the gang gaining on him. Their screams echoed in his head. "Kill whitey," one of them yelled.

His lungs ached and burned. He looked back over his shoulder. Freakin' Carl Lewis pulled ahead of the gang, only he wasn't tall and lean like Carl. He was short and stocky, and had the face of a bulldog. He ran after Eddie like his life depended on catching him—as if Eddie'd just robbed and shot his mother—and he wouldn't stop until he caught him and ripped him limb from limb.

Sirens blared in the background. Eddie prayed for a police car to turn down the street. *There's never a cop around when you need one*, he thought. They pull you over for driving through a yellow light or driving five miles over the speed limit, but when your life was in danger—and your very existence depended on the men in blue—they were lounging in the parking lot of a local Dunkin Donuts downing Boston Cremes and coffee.

They were even closer now. Up the street, a door opened and an old white man stepped outside. Witnessing the commotion, he turned around and said something inaudible to someone inside. Then he waved his hand to Eddie, summoning him toward the house.

*Yes, he's going to help me.* He drew closer to the old man. Eddie could now see his gaunt face: eyes shoved back into bony sockets like pool balls in the corner pockets, thin vertical lines running across his upper lip like emaciated guards, stark white hair blowing in the cool October wind, and a colony of mottled liver spots dotting his face and neck.

"Come on, young man. Quick." He made it to the stoop, past the old man, inside the warm confounds of the house. He wanted to turn around and stick up his middle finger at the oncoming gang and yell, "Fuck you all!" but he reconsidered and thanked the old man. He closed the door behind him.

"Are you okay, young man?"

Breathing heavily, he answered the old man in short staccato bursts. "I think I'm okay. Crazy kids. . .they would have killed me if they caught me."

The old man pulled back the window curtain, peered outside. "I'm

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calling the police," he yelled (as best as he could). His voice was dry and raspy like that of a man who's smoked for most of his life. Eddie could see through the window that the gang disbursed after the old man's threat. "I'm afraid the neighborhood is not what it used to be."

"What have we here?" a voice from behind said. Eddie turned around to find an old sweet-looking lady standing in the doorway. Plump, with a round apple-shaped face and rosy cheeks, she looked like Mrs. Clause.

"Martha," the old man said. "This young man will be staying for dinner tonight."

"Thank you, but you don't have—" he started.

"We won't hear anything of it," the old woman said. "Come inside and make yourself at home."

He got the impression they didn't have too many visitors and he suddenly felt bad for them. An old white couple left behind in the wasteland of a once-great town. They'd probably lived here their entire lives, like his grandparents in the Bronx. His grandfather was born in Harlem. "It was a nice area, when I was a boy," he'd told him. Now you couldn't pay him to go through Harlem in an armored vehicle.

It was all part of the ongoing life cycle, he thought. Out with the old, in with the new. Soon the old folks would die off, leaving behind a festering sore of a community that would eventually become uninhabitable.

The old couple led him into the living room. Stunned, he couldn't believe the mess—the stink. He hadn't smelled anything in the foyer, but in the living room it smelled as if some animal had crawled in from the outside and died. He was shocked. The old couple looked so nice and sweet, but seeing the filth in the living room and smelling that God-awful stench nearly knocked him off his feet.

"You can remove your costume, if you'd like," the old man said. "Please, make yourself at home."

*He's got to be kidding me. The local garbage dump aint got nothing on this place.* "Oh, thanks. I'd almost forgotten." He pulled off the latex snout, wincing. The clerk in the costume shop sold him some tacky crap called spirit gum. At least he'd hoped that's what he sold him and not Krazy Glue by mistake. He removed the wig and placed both on the shelf of a bookcase adjacent to where he stood.

"Dinner will be ready shortly," the old women said.

"Oh, thank you, ma'am. That is very kind of you." With all the chaos, he'd completely forgotten about his ride. Rick and Matt would be driving by any minute to pick him up. "Oh, shi—darn."

"What is it, young man?" the old man asked.

"My friends are supposed to pick me up. I have to wait outside for them. They're probably circling the street now."

The old man and woman glanced at each other in an oddly conspiratorial manner. Then the old woman spoke. "Well, we'll just need to invite your friends for dinner as well," she said. A pernicious grin spread across her face.

"Thank you, but I really must go," he said. Turning toward the old man, he added, "Sir, thank you very much for helping me. You may have very well saved my life."

He put a bony, gnarled hand on Eddie's chest, tapping lightly. "Are you sure you can't stay for dinner? Martha and I would love for you to join us. We can go outside to look for your friends and—"

"I really appreciate what you have done for me, sir, but first I need to find my friends, then I think it is best we go home. It's been a frightening night for me." He noticed the old woman had left the room. "I'm sure you can understand."

The old man removed his hand from his chest, nodded. "I understand. You must do what is right for you, young man. Don't forget your wig and mask," he said, pointing to the bookshelf.

"Oh, thank you. . .and again, I appreciate your helping me."

"Think nothing of it," he said, but the words came out cold and monotone, which sent a chill running down his spine.

Eddie smiled, then walked over to the bookshelf. He collected his wig and latex snout. He was about to turn around when he felt a prick in his rear end. He wheeled around.

Standing beside him with a syringe in hand was the old woman. She held it up, level with her head. She expunged whatever had been in the syringe, her finger still on the plunger. "There we go," she said.

"What did you do?" Eddie asked as he dropped back into the bookshelf. Suddenly, he felt weak—his muscles turned to jelly and he collapsed. He went numb all over. He couldn't move or scream. He could feel the tingling sensation in his arms and legs and neck but he could not move anything. He could feel himself breathing, his heart pounding hard and fast inside his chest.

The old couple closed in, looking at him. They both came into his focal point. He felt as if he was looking through the eyes of a baby in a crib and the old people were his cooing parents. The old man looked at the old woman. "Is he alive, Martha?"

"Yes, I gave him just enough to induce paralysis for up to thirty minutes—more than enough time for us to finish dinner." They smiled at each other, licking their lips. The old lady leaned forward, her image blurring the closer she got. "I know you can hear me, boy. And you can

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feel me too." She pinched his arm, then released.

"It hurts, I know. And you want to cry, you may need to scream, but you can't. I'm sure you are wondering what I injected you with."

The wicked old couple continued to stare at him as if he was a sideshow freak. He screamed as loud as he could. "Help me! Somebody, help me!" But the scream only rang out inside his head. He could feel his heart pounding faster and harder than it should. It would cease its beating soon enough if it continued at this pace.

"And he can hear and see us?" the old man asked, who seemed to have a morbid fascination with the spectacle before him. Hey, lookit here. We got ourselves a stiff, only he isn't really dead. Not really. He looks good and dead, don't he? But nope, he can hear his own cries of terror and see out of those brown orbs of his—it's like watching a movie, only he's got top billing.

"As long as his little heart is beating, he's aware of everything." The old woman smiled in a most wicked way. "I suppose the young man would like to know why we are doing this, Bernard, don't you think?"

"Of course. He's got a right to know," he said. "Go ahead and tell him, Martha."

Eddie gazed at the old couple, horrified. Unmoving.

"Bernard and I have been living on a fixed income for a number of years now, see," she said. "And social security, as you may or may not know, doesn't pay much. A few hundred dollars a month is all we got to live on. You can imagine, with rent and doctor bills alone, we barely have enough money for food. I had spent years saving over ten thousand dollars, which was to be our retirement money so Bernard and I could live out our golden years comfortably and free of worry.

"That was until some low life broke in one day, pushing me to the ground and turning up nearly every piece of furniture in the house. He finally made his way to the bedroom, and upturned the mattress—where I stored the ten thousand dollars. And so, with that, came an end to our dreams. Without our savings, we couldn't make ends meet. What little money we got from the government was barely enough to make a difference."

*Help me!*

"We even had to eat cat food for awhile," the old man said.

"Let me finish the story, Bernard," the old woman snapped.

"Sorry, Martha," he said, apologetically, and then lolled his head.

"Cat food is not fit for human consumption. Do you know what they make it with? Bones, intestines, lungs, hearts, kidneys. . ." The old woman grimaced. "That is when we discovered human flesh."

Eddie could feel an icy finger running down his spine, but he could

not move anything. His eyes were open—paralyzed—unable to blink. A gnawing pain sliced through his pupils but he was helpless against the effects of the drug—whatever the old women injected him with.

*Please, someone! Help me!*

“How do you think Martha can retain her healthy figure?” the old man asked, smiling at his cannibal wife.

“He’s so sweet,” the old women said. “We haven’t eaten in well over a week. . .since we killed Bob, isn’t that right, Bernard?”

He pondered a moment, looking upward. “Yes, Bob, that was it.”

“Bob was our mailman, see,” she said. “He was delivering a special package. We invited him in for a moment and BAM! Bernard—as nimble and agile as ever—came in wielding his hammer.

If he could cry, he would. Eddie continued screaming to no avail. *Help me, God, please help me!*

“It was a mess,” the old man said.

“Terrible. We were wiping the floor for hours after. I had no idea so much blood can come out of a human skull. It was like wine pouring out of a fallen bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. We usually try to avoid such unpleasant situations; however, Bernard failed to bring home the bottle of Curare I asked him to get.”

“Martha Harriet Burcham. I told you I was sorry about that.”

“No matter now, Bernard. What’s done is done,” she said. Returning her gaze to Eddie she said, “Curare is a powerful drug . . . in fact, you are feeling the effects of it now. Your body is paralyzed, but if the drug is doing what it is supposed to, you can hear every word I am saying. You will feel pain, but you cannot scream or cry.”

“That’s good for us,” the old man said with a wicked razor-like smile.

“Anyway, I’m hungrier than a pack of wolves.” She looked at the old man. “Bernard, grab his shoulders. Let’s move him to the table.” The old man slipped his arms underneath Eddie’s armpits from behind. He lifted his buttocks off the floor. The old woman grabbed his legs and they both hefted the limp body. They made their way through the living room, down the hallway, and into the kitchen, laying his body on a wooden table, which looked all too big for the kitchen. It was bare. Pink faded stains marred the surface.

“Help me remove his clothes,” the old woman said.

Eddie’s heart now beat so fast he could barely hear himself think. He concentrated on moving something—anything. He focused on his pinkie finger. It was a start. . .if he could move his pinkie, he may be able to will himself to move his hand, then his arm. That would be enough to clout the old fuckheads in the face. He could knock both of them out.

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They were old anyway, and his youth and strength compared to their age and infirmity made him Arnold fucking Schwarzenegger. *Move*, he thought. *Move. Move. Move.* . .

Then he felt it. It was the greatest feeling he'd felt in a long time. His pinkie and ring finger twitched. It wasn't much. . .but it was progress.

He could feel his pants sliding down his legs; everything went dark for a moment as the old man pulled his shirt over his head.

The ticking of the clock on the kitchen wall. The hum of the refrigerator. The squeaking of heels on linoleum. All of these sounds came together in a twisted cacophony, sending rivers of chills down Eddie's spine. Yes, he could feel the chills wavering in his torso; he could smell something permeating the kitchen that may be burnt toast; he could feel the cold kitchen air assault his bare skin. But he could not talk, could not scream. Something awful was going to happen. What were these monsters going to do to him? Why had they unclothed him?

The bright yellow sun on the ceiling pierced his eyes like electric drill bits. Eddie could see nothing but the glare of the light. An occasional head or arm or shoulder would come into his field of vision for a moment, and then sink back into the wave of blinding light. Now his entire hand jerked. A tingling sensation coursed through his arm. More progress. . .

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"We've got to get out and look for him."

"Fuck that," Keith said.

"We're not leaving him here." He pulled the Corolla over to the curb, killed the engine. He twisted to the side and leaned his right arm over the driver's headrest. "Okay, Matt, you go this way." He pointed toward the rear window.

Then he turned to face Keith in the passenger seat. "You go across the street. I'm going to work this area. Just ring some doorbells, ask if anyone has seen a kid dressed as a werewolf, all righty?" They nodded and all three got out of the car and walked up to houses to inquire about the whereabouts of Eddie.

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Eddie heard something new. It sounded like someone tucking a chair under the table. Then he could hear speaking again. "Will you please say grace, Martha? You do it so well." The old woman said grace, they both said, "Amen," then he saw a fork and steak knife out of the corner of his

eye. *What's this?*

"You go ahead, Martha. You prepared the gravy. . .you go first."

"Thank you, Bernard."

The doorbell rang.

The old couple looked at each other, surprised looks on their faces. "Go see who it is, Bernard." The old man rose from his chair and walked through the kitchen door to the hallway. "And get rid of them."

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Matt rang the doorbell. After several seconds, he heard a click from the door—probably the peephole cover. Someone was on the other side of the door, shuffling. He gave them a few seconds and when there was no response, he rang the bell again. There was definitely someone behind the door, who attempted to remain undetected. They were probably peering at his distorted image, through the peephole, wondering why a white boy is standing on their stoop. He'd try one more time, then move on. He rang the bell again. Several locks opened—at least three and a deadbolt. Then the sound of a chain rattling.

The door creaked open slowly. Old gnarled fingers with knuckles the size of golf balls grasped the edge of the door. The rest of the old man stepped out from behind, looking startled and perhaps frightened.

"Sorry to disturb you sir, but you didn't happen to see a kid dressed as a werewolf trick or treating tonight, have you?"

"Oh, I'm afraid not. We don't get many trick or treaters around here," he said. "The neighborhood's not as safe as it used to be and—"

"Wait a minute." Matt craned his neck, pointed over the old man's shoulder. "On the bookshelf over there, what's that?"

The jittery old man gave a quick look at the bookcase. "Oh, that's part of my grandson's costume."

In the background, Rick called to Matt.

"Over here," he called. He returned his focus to the old man. "That looks like my friends wig and nosepiece."

"Quick, come in. I don't like keeping the door open. . .the boys around here are always up to no good." Matt stepped inside; the old man closed the door behind him.

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Matt was inside. Eddie couldn't describe the overwhelming feeling of elation he felt in that moment. Matt was going to rescue him. And they'd go to the police and have these psychotic old goats arrested and

## The Dare

put in prison for the rest of their natural lives.

*Thank you, God. Oh, thank you.* Eddie just needed to find a way to signal Matt to let him know where he was. Giving everything he had in his being, every ounce of concentration and mental discipline, he visualized himself screaming at the top of his lungs—a scream loud enough to wake the dead. All that came out was a thin whisper that gave way to a broken wheezing that sounded like a broken teakettle. He tried putting his lips together to mouth Matt’s name, when a hand quieted him.

“What do you think you are doing?” the old woman said.

He was regaining strength. He could feel his hand, numb and tingling. Now he could move his entire arm. He couldn’t quite raise it—yet—but he was getting there. “You keep that trap shut, young man, or I’ll cut your tongue out.” She scowled, holding the steak knife in front of his face.

He heard a thwacking sound and then a desperate sigh followed by a thump. Then a succession of thwacking sounds and an occasional grunt.

The old woman smiled contentedly at Eddie. He was regaining control of his muscles. She saw the hand jerking and his eyes now moved—a quick flick in the direction of the sounds. “Looks like we’ll be having dessert tonight, too,” she said with a mad grin stretched across her face.

Eddie could hear Matt’s limp body being dragging along the floor. His peripheral vision caught a faint glimpse of the old man shambling past the kitchen doorway, pulling something. (Matt—*Oh my God, is this really happening?*) He could hear the thumping of Matt’s body as it dropped down the stairs, undoubtedly to the basement—that may have been a cellar of death for all he knew—housing a stockpile of bodies.

The sound old mans footsteps as he made his way back up chilled Eddie. All hope was lost. Matt was dead, and if he couldn’t will his languid limbs back to life, he’d be sure to follow suit.

Returning to the kitchen, the old man sat back down, ran his hand through his mussed white hair, and apologized for the delay. “Done?” Martha asked.

“All done. Shall we eat?”

Martha picked up the wavy edged ceramic gravy dish. Silence for a moment then...

Searing hot liquid streaming down his upper thigh. “Ahh!” The scream erupted from his gaping maw—not a loud blood curdling scream, but loud enough to possibly alert help. The pain was excruciating. He could see nothing but he imagined layers of skin rolling off his leg like thin gossamer cloth. He screamed again.

The old woman placed down the dish and reached inside his mouth,

clasping his tongue between her fingers. She drew the steak knife across his tongue as if she was cutting a piece of meat. Removing the tongue, she dipped the bloody mass in the gravy and shoved it into her mouth, chewing and smiling. Next, he felt his skin punctured, and he literally saw stars. White-silvery flashers whirled in front of his eyes. The pain in his leg pulsed with its own strained heartbeat. He could now feel a serrated object—the steak knife—sawing into his flesh. A new feeling of streaming liquid. He could not tell if it was the gravy, blood, or both. He tried to move his arm, but he was still too weak and the pain was so severe he nearly froze in place. A burbling sound emitted from his mouth. He was choking on his own blood.

The door slammed open, and Rick and Keith sprinted into the kitchen. Keith stepped back against the wall, shoving his fist in his mouth. Rick stood there, stock-still. A look of absolute horror fixed on his face; his mouth dangled open like a door on a broken hinge.

The old man shot up, ran past Rick into the living room.

“Wha—” Rick began to speak, but was silenced instantly as the old man came up from behind and slammed him on the head with such inexplicable force, his skull cracked open like an delicate eggshell. He dropped to the ground, motionless.

Eddie could now turn his head slightly, but lacked the strength to attack the old couple or run. He saw Keith’s eyes widen in horror and repulsion. He wheeled around, opened the door behind him, and stepped inside. Next, Eddie heard him scream as he plummeted down the stairs of the basement. Then there was silence. The old man walked over, closed the basement door.

“I’m going to have a heart attack,” the old man said as he dropped onto the chair in the kitchen, breathing heavily.

“You’ll be fine, Bernard,” the old woman said, fixing his hair with her hands. “Look at the bright side of it. . .we’ve got enough food to last us for weeks.” They smiled at each other and kissed.

The old man looked at Eddie, then said, “Looks like the Curare is wearing off.”

“Yes, he started coming out of it about five minutes ago. No matter, he will be weak for several more minutes. Let’s finish dinner.”

“*Oh God, please stop!*” The terrified screams of agony fell on deaf ears. The high-pitched cries trapped inside the cave of his mind echoed in his skull. He could hear the contented grunts one makes when immersed in a delectable feast and he could hear his own masticated flesh grinding between the teeth of the old people’s mouths. And he continued screaming until he had nothing left. Then he closed his inner eyes as a curtain of blackness dropped before him and the sounds of

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chewing and the old people cheerfully talking waned.





# n00bs

## Chris Rouillard

**The freaks were back again.**

Every Halloween, or, in this case, the day before Halloween, the message board got an influx of new users, most of whom exuded black teen angst like so much bad cologne. They disguised these tirades as “horror” stories—this was, after all, a horror writing message board—but most of them read like poorly-conceived garbage that only their friends, and maybe their mothers (if their mothers were illiterate closet alcoholics), would love.

Chuck couldn't wait until they were gone in a couple of weeks, when their bleak outlooks were replaced with dreams of what they could whine out of their parents for Christmas. In the four years since he had been coming to the board, this behavior had become as predictable as the

sunrise. They always came about a week or three before Halloween, and always left a week or so later, leaving behind a straggler or two that was actually interested in becoming a better writer.

The most popular discussion, as was often the case this time of year, was about how all of the popular writers were all hacks and couldn't write, but only got by because they "knew someone in the industry". The biggest supporter of this theory (and the poster in the lead for the "Halloween Asshole Award"—another of their holiday traditions), was someone with the ironic screen name "Gr8Wr1ter". He had posted a sample of his writing, some piece of crap with a lot of gore but little story, as an example of why the popular authors were afraid of him. As with the rest of his ilk, his writing sucked, but his ability to misuse the many forms of "there" was awe-inspiring.

Chuck was anxious for them to be gone, but he sure as hell was going to have fun tormenting them while they were around. Towards "Gr8", he had launched a profanity-laden tirade that was more scathing due to its accuracy than the words he used. Of course, this ignited "Gr8"'s fury, which involved some insults about Chuck's mother and a dog. Pretty standard stuff, and a lot of fun for someone of his disposition.

He finished another post, this one comparing Gr8's writing ability to some that he had read above a urinal, when he saw that he had four private messages from other posters.

The first two were from his friend Frank, another board regular that had become his fast friend despite their widely divergent personalities. While Chuck reveled in tormenting the newbies, Frank just patiently waited for them to go away, disappearing for as long as a week in a row during the season. He quickly jotted replies to both of them, and looked at the remaining two.

The first of them was from a "girl" named Marissa. Chuck knew what most people who chatted on-line a lot knew—half of the people on message boards were male, and the other half were males pretending to be female. That wasn't entirely accurate, but it was close enough to the truth for him to delete the message without reading it, especially considering how much he had been trashing a lot of the newbies. Any one of them would love the chance to knock him down a peg by tricking him into thinking he was chatting with a girl.

The second was more his speed—it was from his current arch-nemesis, "Gr8Wr1ter". In perfect synchronicity with the feeb's talent, it was entitled "Your a puthetic ass!!!" Chuck opened it, almost drooling over the fun he was about to have. He had been expecting a lengthy blast of insults that he could tear apart piece by piece, so he was somewhat disappointed and baffled by the message's contents.

*We're coming.*

Though he chuckled at this message, which was obviously some sort of weak Internet threat, cold fingers tickled his spine, and he couldn't resist the temptation to look around the room behind him. He lived in a dumpy, third-floor studio apartment in Denver—the only thing in the room was his bed, dresser, desk, and a door that led to the bathroom and a small kitchenette. A neon-lit clock counted off time above his unmade bed—nothing else in the room made a sound, but he couldn't shake the belief that he was somehow being watched.

Already feeling like a world-class asshole, he turned back to the screen, and typed a message in reply.

*What, is that some sort of threat, jackass? You don't even know where I am.*

As soon as he clicked “Send”, the page refreshed to show fifteen new messages, two of them from Gr8, and the rest from various other new users, none of whom he recognized. He considered deleting them, but something compelled him to open them instead.

The first from Gr8 was a single word that renewed his inner chill and increased it ten-fold. Gooseflesh covered his arms, something that he had experienced maybe twice in his life, even though he lived in a place where the weather was below freezing much of the year.

That word was *Denver*.

Somehow, they knew where he lived, even though he had been extremely careful to never put his personal information on the boards. Only Frank and one other user knew anything more than his screen handle, and neither of them would give this guy any information.

The second message from Gr8, and the ones from the other users, alternated between two phrases: *We're Coming*, and *Tomorrow*. Chuck glanced at the time on the computer. It was 11:56. In four minutes, it would *be* tomorrow.

He stood up and checked the lock on the door. Both the key lock and the deadbolt were set, but he propped a chair under the handle just to be sure. There was a window overlooking the parking lot, but without a tall ladder and a lot of noise, it wouldn't prove of much use to anyone. The only other entrance, if it could be called that, was a small ventilation window in the bathroom with a scenic view of the dumpsters. Unless these guys were six inches wide and had an inclination toward the smell of trash, they wouldn't be coming in that way.

The messages, despite their banality, seemed like a bad omen to have around after the day changed, so he deleted them. After that, he clicked the screen “refresh” several times to make sure that there weren't any more. There weren't. They had gotten their message across.

## Chris Rouillard

Chuck pushed the covers aside and sat on his bed while he contemplated his next move. He could call the police, but he still hadn't shaken the feeling that this was nothing more than one of the pointless conflicts that Internet nerds got into all the time. It was one thing to look like an idiot in front of a message board full of strangers—it was another thing altogether to look like one in front of the law. He laid back and stared at the ceiling, trying to figure out what to do.

The first realization that he had actually fallen asleep came forty minutes later, when he was awakened by a hard rapping at the door. Instantly awake and on his feet, he stared at the entry, waiting for another knock. If they were here, he had cause to call the police, but if it was a neighbor or a kid pulling a simple Halloween prank...

He picked up the phone and held it tightly in his hand, finger poised to dial if anyone tried opening the door. From the top of the dresser, he grabbed the only weapon he could find—a half-empty beer bottle. Warm suds poured down his arm when he brandished it like a small club, but he hardly noticed.

Nobody tried to open it or force their way in, but he almost preferred that they had. To his left, the window rattled fitfully in its frame as something hit it twice. His heart leapt to his throat, but after the shock wore off, the feeling of immense anger replaced his fear. Incensed, he stalked over to the window and flung the curtains open. If someone was out there with a ladder, they were going to have a long trip to the ground.

There was no one; only the thin sheen of condensation caused by the cool autumn night, with the words “We're Here” slashed into it with angry letters. So transfixed was he by the impossible writing, that it took him a moment before he realized that he had an audience.

Off to the right, a couple dozen feet below, three people that looked like teenagers stood in a close group, all dressed in the same sweatshirt with a vaguely-familiar logo, and all staring intently at his apartment—at *him*. Though the yellow phosphorescent lights made it hard to tell for sure, they all appeared unnaturally pale, as if they hadn't seen the sun in some time. Their unwavering eyes chilled him, and a wave of nausea tested his resolve. He won, for the time being, and managed to hit the “Call” button on the phone.

Instead of a dial tone, a slight, persistent hissing escaped from the receiver. He jabbed the button a few times, only to receive more of the same. He was about to hang up when a voice spoke in a strange combination of child-like innocence, and murderous intent.

*You can't do THAT with a burger!*

The phrase was instantly recognizable—he had said it dozens, if not hundreds of times himself when he was younger. As he was about to

enter the world of middle school fifteen years earlier, a local chicken joint had run an ad campaign with that slogan, and, like most mindless things, it had become instantly popular. Everyone from school kids to adults said it, each meaning different things (and many not meaning anything at all). He hadn't heard it in years, and this was certainly not where he had expected to.

His reminiscing was cut off by a sharp squeaking from the bathroom. He dropped the useless phone on the ground and started towards the other room, the inadequacy of the bottle apparent as it slipped in his sweaty hand. He wished that he hadn't been so quick to dump the beer; warm or not, it would have helped calm his nerves.

He chanced a quick look out the window as he passed it. The three voyeurs had been joined by three more, and another half dozen stood a ways behind them, out of the reach of the street lamp. Even though he couldn't see their faces, their posture made it abundantly clear that they, like their six friends, were staring straight at him.

The squeaking from the bathroom became more frantic, and, against his better judgment, he went in to see what was causing it. As he rounded the corner, his eyes met the yellowing eyes of what once had been a lanky kid. It was in the process of squeezing through the slit of a window.

Its head, left shoulder, and arm were already all the way through, and it was in the process of pulling the right in when Chuck stumbled through the entrance. The boy-thing had ashy-gray skin with dark green splotches that somehow looked dry and slimy at the same time. When it smiled, rotted teeth jutted from its black gums like scorched tree stumps. The window was far too small for its passage, and it had lost a great deal of skin trying to pull itself through. Sticky blood smeared on the white windowpane, but none flowed out of the thing's wounds.

It stared at Chuck for a moment, with all of the subtlety of a dog checking out a piece of hamburger, before continuing its grisly entrance. The window squeaked again as it squeezed through, which finally broke the paralysis that bound him to his spot.

Wondering how in the hell he was going to get away from the dozen of these things that were still outside, he turned to run, only to crash into one that was standing in the doorway behind him. It fell to the ground, and he heard the dry snap as its left leg broke through the skin. Undaunted by what should have been agonizing pain, it looked up at him with the same hungry expression as the one in the bathroom.

Chuck had the urge to faint, but once again, his willpower was victorious. Instead of falling to the ground, which would have undoubtedly meant his end, he dodged the creature on the floor, and

## Chris Rouillard

started towards the front door. He would have a better chance outside in the open, no matter how many of the things were out there.

The rest of the voyeurs weren't outside any more. Those that could fit in the tiny apartment were inside, standing around and on the bed. Behind him, he heard a wet thud as the one in the bathroom finally made it through its peculiar entrance. Those that couldn't fit inside floated outside the window, following him with a gaze that almost seemed disappointed that they couldn't be in where the fun was.

A rotten, wet smell permeated everything, and that's when he realized that he knew why he recognized the symbol. They were the Boulder City Cougars.

Fifteen years earlier, while he was still overusing the hamburger phrase, a city soccer team had been on their way back from a game on their way to a Halloween party. A drunk in a delivery truck had plowed into the side of their small bus, knocking them into a bridge pylon before they crashed to the tributary below. Those that weren't killed by the impact drowned, as the bus was sucked to the bottom of the river. Nobody survived, save the drunk, who was now serving a long sentence in prison.

For more than a year, anti-drunk-driving groups had used the Cougars' symbol as their totem. He had seen it dozens of times—the public service announcements always seemed to be run during his favorite shows. Now, the Cougars were back, and they didn't like to be criticized.

He looked closely at their faces as they surrounded him, and saw with black humor that many of them still had makeup on their faces that they had started to put on that night. One was painted to be a monster of some sort, one a clown, and one seemed to have been in the process of dolling itself up as a girl with bright blue eye-shadow and pink blush decorating its decaying skin.

Chuck began to laugh. Anyone that heard it would know it was the laughter of someone at the end of his rope. Fat tears rolled down his face, and he had to hold onto the side of the desk to avoid collapsing to the ground. His laughter lasted until they reached him, and then, it turned to screams.



# Something Bad

W.M. Ollie

**Chris Ricker** watched the kid in the skeleton costume toss a homemade popcorn ball in his plastic Wal-Mart sack. He laughed at crazy old lady Whitcomb standing in the doorway, clown makeup smeared all over her face, hair teased up like friggin' Bozo.

Chris caught up with the kid just as he was closing the old lady's gate. "Yo, Charlie, what's up?"

"How." Charlie raised a hand, saluting the buckskin-clad youth like a cowboy out of an old movie. "Nice costume."

"Yeah, my mom made it for me."

"Nice."

"Charlie, you're not gonna believe this shit."

“What?”

“There’s a dead vampire up at the graveyard.”

“Sure there is.”

“I’m serious, Charlie. I saw it in the old tomb. She’s laid out bigger’n shit, with a stake right through her heart.”

“Her,” Charlie scoffed. “There’s a woman laid out in the old tomb with a stake through her heart.”

“I swear. I was walkin’ past the old soldier’s cemetery and I seen a light comin’ outa the tomb. I walked up there and found her. I almost had a heart attack.” Chris nodded his head eastward. “C’mon, I’ll show her to you.”

“I ain’t goin’ up to that graveyard.”

“Why? Ya scared?”

“No, I ain’t scared. I ain’t stupid, either.”

“What, you don’t believe me?”

“Heck no.” Charlie snorted. “*Vampire?* Right.”

“I tell ya what.” Chris held out his nearly full sack of candy. “We go up there and there ain’t no vampire; I’ll give you this.”

“Oh yeah?” Charlie eyed the assortment of goodies peeking out at him: candy corn and jawbreakers, Hershey’s kisses, miniature Snicker bars and Milky Ways. Add that to his stash and he’d be rolling in candy for a while. He looked Chris in the eye and stuck out his hand. “You got a deal.”

“But,” Chris said while they shook on it, “if there *is* a dead vampire, I get *your* bag’a candy...deal?”

“Deal!” Charlie said, already tasting the Bit-O-Honeys he’d seen lying amongst the other treats.

“C’mon then.” Chris smiled.

The two boys walked side-by-side down the street, passing trick or treaters along the way; passing houses decorated with pumpkins, hanging ghosts, and scarecrows wired to lampposts. Halloween sounds were all around them: children crying out, “*Trick or treat!*” Adults laughing, cheerfully saying, “*Oh, what scary little ghosts!*” Every once in a while they’d hear spooky music floating through the air, or a mock scream.

They drifted away from the neighborhoods and the costumed children. The houses and streetlights grew farther apart. They crossed the railroad tracks and started up a hill that led past the schoolyard.

“How about Johnny Rodgers today?” Chris said, snickering.

“Oh, God.” Charlie laughed, remembering the picture that had been passed around the classroom; Mrs. Peters, naked, cartoon tits drooping past her knees, holding a big rubber dick in her hand.

“I almost shit when I saw that!”

## Something Bad

"Me, too." Charlie laughed again, and so did Chris.

"What a dumbass," Chris said.

"I know. He drew it on the back of one of his old test papers."

Both of them cracked up, laughing uncontrollably.

"Did you see the look on Mrs. Peter's face when she snatched it outta Mindy's hands?"

"Oh, *Mindy*," Charlie said, reverently. "She's got the best tits in the seventh grade."

"Seventh grade? She's got the best tits in the whole damn school!"

They crested the hill and saw the cemetery looming in the distance. Moonlight reflected off the gravestones, making them look like giant, chipped teeth. Near the top of the knoll sat the Unknown Soldiers tomb; a low light emanated from its doorway.

They walked along, talking of Mindy River's tits, Chris waxing poetically about what he would do if he could get his grubby little paws on them: "Whip cream and cherries, with cinnamon sugar sprinkled on top. Then I'd lick 'em off like a cat lappin' up milk!"

Charlie shook his head and laughed, "You're crazy."

"Like a fox," Chris agreed. As they reached the hill's bottom and started across the street, he nodded at the cemetery. "C'mon."

They crossed the street.

Chris stood beneath a burnt out streetlight while Charlie stepped behind a bush and took a leak. When his friend came out, Chris laughed and said, "Ho!"

"What?"

"What?" Chris laughed again. "You pissed all over yourself."

"I couldn't help it." Charlie scowled. "I slipped."

"Well, let's slip on across the street."

They paused at the old rusted gate. Chris swung it open slowly, smiling at the noise it made. He swung it back and forth a couple of times...*creak....creak...*

"Whooo...Charlie," he teased. "She's waiting for you...Charlie."

"Yeah, right." Charlie scoffed, but his face betrayed the nervous chill creeping up his spine.

"She's dried up like an old mummy," Chris whispered. "You ain't gonna believe it."

"I already don't believe it." Charlie thought about the tombstones and the crosses shining beneath the full moon, and the light he'd seen coming from the old crypt.

He looked down at his watch and saw gooseflesh on his forearms. Taking comfort that it was only eight-thirty, he reluctantly followed Chris into the graveyard.

Chris led Charlie across the old confederate soldier's cemetery. A path wound its way to the top of the knoll, but Chris ignored it. He took a short cut, walking over the graves as if they weren't there.

But not Charlie; he wasn't about to step on them.

They passed another grave and stepped onto the path, the tomb so close Charlie could see inside. Shadows danced on the walls. A chilly breeze left dead leaves swirling in its wake, causing Charlie to shiver.

"C'mon!" Chris said.

Following right on his heels, a quick burst of nervous energy sent Charlie bounding up the stairs, into the dimly lit tomb.

A three-pronged candelabrum sat atop the old soldier's resting place. Faint light from three black candles flickered in the wind, casting an eerie glow throughout. The room smelled of freshly turned earth. Charlie wasn't sure if he wanted to see anymore or not.

But when Chris pointed at the floor and whispered, "Look at this shit," Charlie stepped forward.

"See? I told ya."

And there she was, just like Chris had said—laid out bigger than shit, hands clutching a wooden stake that had been pounded right through her breast. A dark stain covered her chest and hands; there was some on her face, too.

"Cool." Charlie was impressed. The figure lying on the concrete floor almost looked real. It had long, black hair falling across its shoulders—a wig, Charlie figured. An old musty robe draped the body. The robe was long and flowing, and Charlie could see that it barely covered her breasts. And then there was that stake, and the painted on blood.

He sat his bag of candy on the floor and knelt down beside her. "How did you do this?" he asked as he reached out to touch her.

"She's real, Charlie," Chris gloated. "Looks like you walked all over town for nothing."

"Looks like *you* owe me a big bag of candy," Charlie sneered. He grabbed an arm and shook her. Her skin felt like leather, and she was light, like she was made out of dried up papier-mâché.

"Careful, Charlie," Chris taunted, "Something bad might happen if you pull that stake out."

Charlie looked over his shoulder. He laughed and said, "Something bad's *gonna* happen if you don't hand over the snacks."

"She's real, Charlie," Chris said. "Give it up."

Charlie grabbed the stake. He pulled it loose, stood up, and turned to his friend. "Surrender the candy or be vanquished!" he called out gleefully, holding the stake like it was a sword.

## Something Bad

Chris' eyes grew wide.

Behind Charlie, someone taunted, "What a scary little ghost!"

A hand grabbed the wrist that held the stake. The hand was cold; the flesh stiff.

The stake clattered to the concrete floor.

Charlie turned and saw the woman standing before him, blood dripping off her chin, jet-black hair cascading across her shoulders. Her blood-soaked robe looked soft and silky. It hung loose against her body, parting enough to show her enormous breasts, nipples fully erect.

"Look at her tits!" Chris cried out. "Look at her fuckin' tits!"

Charlie tried to scream, but his voice died long before it could reach his lips.

The woman grabbed his throat and tore it open with long, razor-sharp nails. Blood splashed onto the floor; Charlie's exposed windpipe twisted like a beheaded snake, desperately trying to draw another breath. She clamped her mouth on the bloody hole, groaning, sucking, blood falling off her chin, dripping onto her breasts; jagged teeth gnawing shredded flesh, arms locked around him in a lover's embrace, squeezing his body, dancing and swaying, grinding her hips against him.

Chris dropped his bag of candy and grabbed the stake. He stepped forward and swung the weapon with all of his might, driving the stake deep into her back with an audible *thwack*!

Blood exploded from the creature. She howled and grabbed her chest, coughing up blood and spewing bile. Charlie's quaking body bounced onto the floor, as she spun around, took a step toward Chris and fell to her knees. Groping and clawing at the wooden stick poking through her breast, she fell on her back, pushing the stake deeper, moaning softly, eyelids fluttering like butterfly wings.

Chris edged closer, saw the stake protruding from the ragged hole in her chest. He watched her skin shrivel and dry up, nails receding into her fingertips. Her long, silky hair grew coarse again. It took him a moment or two to get up the nerve to touch her. When he finally did feel her leathery skin, he said, "Wow!"

He turned and saw Charlie, throat ripped wide open, lying in his own blood, and said "wow" again.

Chris grabbed Charlie's feet. He dragged him over to the wall by the Unknown Soldier's concrete slab, then picked up Charlie's bag of candy and ran into the night, dodging tombstones and crosses as he hauled ass through the cemetery.

He made his way down the hill, burst through the gate, and ran hard down the deserted street, turning corners, cutting through yards. He left the darkness behind, breathing heavily, lungs nearly bursting, finally

W.M. Ollie

passing a few trick or treaters and houses decked out in Halloween gear.

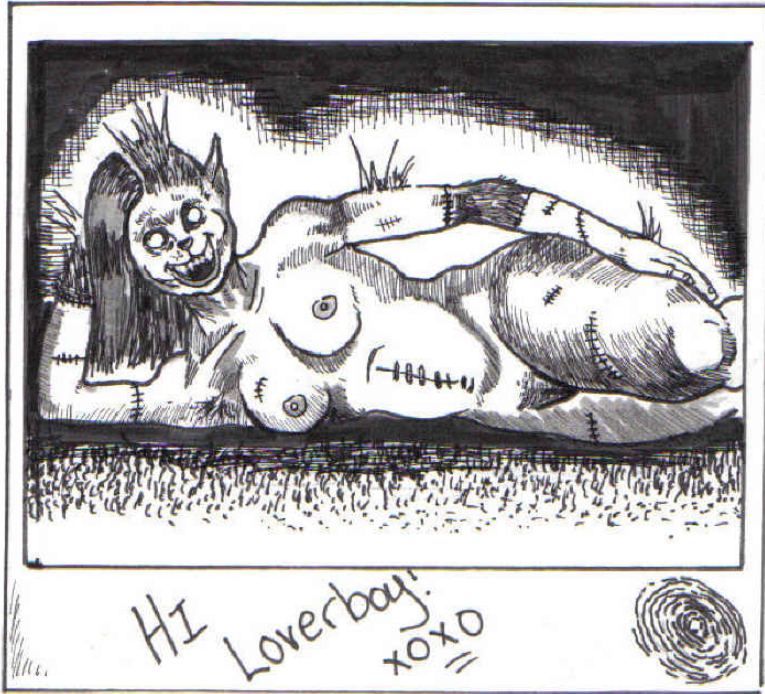
He saw a kid standing under a streetlight, red hair poking out of his baseball cap, and knew right away whom it was. He slowed down. Eying the boy's nearly full sack of candy, he walked up to him and said, "Yo, Johnny Rodgers."

"What's up, Chris?"

"Dude, you're not gonna believe this shit."

"What?"

"There's a dead vampire up at the graveyard!"



# Love Song For a Meat Orchid

Joseph Armstead

**It was the last week of an Indian Summer** that had held on to the autumn season far too long and it was Halloween.

Hotter than hell and Halloween. There was something wrong with that.

Goddamn global warming.

One hundred and seven degrees in the shade, the threat of a thunderstorm by mid-afternoon, and thirty-eight more miles to go on

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his daily route. He'd already picked up the messy remains of three accidents; two with deer, and one with a large dog, along with a couple assorted squirrel and possum kills. The California Highway Patrol was really working him today as the dispatcher placed one call after another to him across the radio. Just another day in paradise.

...sometimes, when the light was just right filtering down through the clouds on a foggy day, he was reminded of the color of her hair at dusk and the way her silken tresses danced on the breeze...

It was Wednesday and Charlie Mopather, California Department of Public Works—Highways Division, was on his usual northern route running the Coastal Highway 101 Humboldt County stretch between Albion and Mendocino. It was a beautiful route to work and tended to be rather solitary mid-week, especially during the off-season for tourism, and Charlie often took long breaks where he would park his yellow long-bed, Public Works pickup truck and just stare off at the Pacific horizon, watching the waves roll in. He was thankful for that. It took his mind off the endless array of automotive-instigated carnage he dealt with each day. Being an animal lover, this job really took its toll on his mental well-being. He needed the occasional stop to take a breath and fill his sight with the wild beauty of fog-draped or sun-splashed empty beaches. It reminded him that there was still beauty in the living world.

Death was Charlie's business. He cleaned up roadkill from off the northern California coastal highways. He helped foster the illusion that everything was beautiful.

...he swore that sometimes he could smell the faint ghost of her scent on the winds fanning in from off the sea, an aroma of flesh and of mystery and of romance, the perfume of magic, and his throat would tighten at the memory...

Life in Charlie's world wasn't beautiful. Hadn't been in a long time.

Five years ago he had been a hard-working Internet webmaster, had his own business with his own clientele and a couple of award-winning website designs for high-visibility businesses, and he was living large: fast cars, lots of electronic toys, expensive hobbies, high-tech spacious condominium, partial ownership in a new vineyard, gym membership, amiable-if-annoyingly self-centered and self-important techie-industry friends, and an ego that was growing by leaps and bounds. He partied with people who were "in the know", if not quite movers and shakers. He partied a lot, actually, and most times without restraint. He worked his connections. He wined and he dined and he made deals to further promote his business. Then there was a major downturn in the economy, the "Dotcom collapse", and his web design business died a sudden and ugly death. Business dried up overnight. Clients disappeared. Bills

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went unpaid. "Tech" became a dirty word in many boardrooms in corporate America and "webmasters" became business luxuries as many technology-based industries struggled with lost venture capital, unwise and poorly-developed business models, public disinterest, and corporate bean-counter accounting backlash.

And there was the cocaine...

Charles William Mopather, Jr. became just another unemployed whiz-kid. His cockiness faded after the first year of sustained unemployment. His savings account and his stocks supported him in the style to which he'd become accustomed to living for only so long before he was forced to make major lifestyle changes. The fast cars, the fast friends and the techie-toys disappeared. The vineyard died and was forced into bankruptcy. The massive ego took some very serious hits. Eight more months of unemployment passed and reality suddenly smacked Charlie upside the head: he had to liquidate his holdings and was forced to dip into his IRA. He was suddenly confronted with the notion that he might not be able to work as a webmaster again. Charlie would have to get a "normal" job.

And the flow of recreational cocaine had slowed to a mere trickle...

...he was a 'whiz-kid', an innovator, a creator, he was someone for whom the rules didn't apply, he was born to redefine them, break them, rewrite them to better suit his unique view of reality, a whiz-kid, he had the capacity to learn new things all the time and to become good at those new things, he could master many skills and all he'd ever needed was the right motivation, the right course on which to set his feet, he could reshape the world if he so desired and desire was a huge motivator to him, it was a fire that raged in the dark places in his mind and came out as lightning from his fingertips when he designed and molded and invented things no one had ever before seen, things that some said were better left hidden in the dark ...

Throughout all that, he had been involved with a clever, personable woman named Annette who was a sales woman at an art gallery. He had never really treated her with the respect she was due, had never really appreciated the intelligence and ingenuity it took to do her job, and he had seen her as more of a trophy shouting his success to the outside world than as a soulmate. She was tall with palomino-blond hair, wide green eyes, flawless skin; a former competitive collegiate volleyball player, and was about as politically liberal as they came. She was a bleeding heart and he often made her naive beliefs the butt of his cynical jokes. She stood by him as best she could when the hard times came, but he was impossible to live with; his wounded pride and offended sense of entitlement made him a madman. She tried. She really did. All the

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while he had stubbornly refused to take work that he thought was beneath his education and abilities, all the while he alienated those few true friends who were trying to help him, all the while he insisted that he work in a non-existent niche in a metamorphosed workplace, all the while Annette had stayed by his side and had taken up the economic slack by taking on commissions she hadn't really wanted, schmoozed with smarmy art connoisseurs who were looking to procure a helluva lot more than mere paintings from her, and flown away on trips to seminars to network with people she didn't trust or like. She hadn't complained. Not once. Not even when one of her more aggressive and less socially-correct clients had slipped her rohypnol and raped her at a high-society party. She'd suffered silently and looked to Charlie for appreciation, for some measure of support, for comfort, for justice. For his part, though, he had been too self-centered and deep into his depression to see what was happening to her. She tried. But it takes two to tango...

Annette left, along with his self-esteem. Along with any chance he'd had at salvation.

...he could imagine he could hear her voice mingling with the music from the surf, hiding inside the sound of the waves, and she was laughing at his jokes and singing her favorite fluffy Top 40 songs endearingly off-key, he could just imagine it...

And then had come the car accident and the fire. He had been coked-up way beyond what he could handle and he hadn't slept for three days and he was switching lanes on the highway doing ninety miles an hour in a car that had needed new brakes and a new transmission. The inevitable had happened. He slammed into the rear of a semi-truck and the car had bounced off and flipped into another lane, across the highway median, and into oncoming traffic.

His car had fireballed when he'd been hit, a side-impact crash. A trio of concerned motorists had quickly pulled him to safety before the fire had thoroughly consumed him and, aside from a few broken ribs, a broken collar bone, and a couple of busted teeth, his injuries were a lot lighter than he deserved. But the fire had scarred his face badly, dissolving his nose and his ears, searing off his lips. Charlie didn't look like Charlie anymore.

Hell, he barely resembled anything human anymore.

Five years passed. He descended into a private hell of constant desperation, closed doors, broken mirrors, and dead opportunities.

He faced the reality of being alone.

One hundred and seven sweaty degrees in the shade and he was carting around three hundred pounds of decaying dead flesh under a

## Love Song for a Meat Orchid

yellow rubber tarp in the back of his truck. His gloves and his shovel stank of fecal matter, spilt organ juices, roadside oil, and ruptured animal flesh. There was a still-damp stain of something he didn't really want to identify drying on the front of his shirt. Whenever he stopped to admire the vistas and listen to some soft jazz playing from his truck radio, he tried to stand upwind from the scent of carnage wafting off the truck-bed.

He had learned to do with less. He had learned to make the best of what was at-hand. He learned new skills. He had learned to adapt.

Charles William Mopather, Jr., became plain old Charlie and it was okay. Really.

He had learned to cope.

He had almost learned how to be alone.

...it was their eyes, he realized, or at least it was the eyes of those who still had eyes, whose orbs weren't split or crushed into so much oozing jelly; the eyes that stared blankly into the uncovered depths of Eternity with the innocence and submissiveness of those truly without ego, free of any sense of self, free of the need to accomplish or to stand out, it was their eyes as he stood reflected in them, carrying the remains of their stiff, wooden flesh from the site of the last act of unbelievable violence that had presaged their abrupt demise, it was the eyes, glassy and spiritless, staring out a window onto a panoramic expanse of exquisite Nothingness, the eyes...

It was Halloween and Paradise was only a couple of hours away. The thought made his skin tingle.

She was waiting for him. The thought filled him with a cold fire of anticipation that threatened to make him giddy.

He had waited a long time for this. He had worked very, very hard for this special night.

He would take her out tonight. He would take her from within the dimmed interior of their stark home and out into the night to dance with him under the stars on Halloween. It was the one night of the year where he truly felt she would be comfortable seeing the world. It was the one night of the year where he could truly look at her and accept her with all her flaws.

It was the one night of the year where he felt comfortable facing the truth of what he had forced himself to become in order to survive.

"Jesus, Charlie, what in hell are you TALKING about? Did you just hear what came out of your mouth? Did you? Don't even joke like that, man!" one of his new friends, an unimpressive-but-solid, sports-loving, divorced father of two named Rick had said to him over coffee one time in the motor pool while they were waiting for repairs to be completed on one of the departmental pickups. Rick was as close to a regular friend as

## Joseph Armstead

Charlie had made since re-entering the work force.

"It's not criminal. Yeah, it's different, but you know, a lot of new things are. Different, that is. After all, people buy those dolls," he remembered saying as he looked away from Rick's shocked expression. "People use foreign objects. Hell, they use fruit. People go to prostitutes and risk disease. They make do with what is at hand. And there's the huge push on for recycling and rescuing the environment. You know what I mean, it's getting society used to the idea that nothing should go to waste. Why not something like this? It's just an idea. I mean, it's a hell of a weird idea, but it's still an idea. It's not like you or I would ever resort to something like that..."

"Naw, man, naw. This turns some kind of a corner. This is not a good thing. It's disgusting. Revolting. Maybe even a little crazy. And if anyone found out... oh my fucking God, if anyone ever caught wind of a department of the state government recycling this kind of stuff for human use—shit, there'd be lynchings, Charlie. No shit, they'd slap a death penalty on someone crazy enough to try that," Rick had said, shaking his head and wringing his large, calloused hands as if he were afraid he'd never get them clean.

"But why would that be? We stuff animals. We stuff them and put them up for display in public places. This is sort of like that. It's organic and biodegradable. It's just like one of those plastic, inflatable porno dolls except..."

"DON'T! Don't even say it...! It's unnatural!" He recalled Rick had looked slightly nauseated, "green around the gills" was the phrase that had come to his mind then, as Rick had thought about what they were saying.

" 'Unnatural'? What about those Madame Tussaud's, those wax museums? What about mannequins in store windows? They're making them more and more life-like all the time. Giving them nipples and belly buttons and shit. Why? Why do they need to be THAT realistic? It's just for clothes hanging off a tailor's dummy, right? It's just a human-shaped hanger. Talk about 'unnatural'... Well, you're wrong! It's about how we see ourselves...", Charlie had argued.

"It's different than that, Charlie, and you KNOW it! Nothing had to die first...", Rick had said past a grimace of distaste.

"Yeah? What about Disneyland? Yeah, I said that shit: Disneyland! The fucking animatronics... Don't get me started on THAT!"

Rick had looked pain-stricken as he'd regarded Charlie, his mouth gaping and his eyes bulging. "Oh, get the fuck OUTTA here! I'm not listening to THIS!"

"Okay, okay, Rick, relax already! I was just bouncing a stray

## Love Song for a Meat Orchid

thought off you..."

"Drop it, man. It's a bad thought. Leave it back under the rock you dragged it out from. This job is bad enough without adding something like that into the mix."

So Charlie had done that. He'd let it drop. He'd left it alone. Publicly, anyway.

Privately, he had gone out and purchased flex tubing and plastic joints and a book on Gray's Anatomy, then gone through about four design drafts before he'd finally built a skeleton.

He was designing again. He was thinking outside the box. It had felt good.

And Halloween was the perfect time for the unveiling, the best time to make it happen.

...after building the skeleton and after stuffing it's cavities with sawdust body-balloons, it had taken him nineteen days, sewing for four hours a night, his fingers sore and blistered from using the leather-stitching needles, the fat fish-netting hooked needles, and the muscles in his hands ached from the power he'd had to put into using the serrated edged shears, but he had done it, he'd even purchased an auburn brown wig, shoulder-length, and he'd carefully attached that to the skin he'd shaved, cleaned with saddle soap, and then kept supple with lexol conditioner and he'd cried whole he'd done it, wept like a child as he'd poured his dreams and fantasies into creating a five feet seven-inch doll that he'd bought a floor length party dress for and that he'd applied makeup and eyeliner to, a doll, a surrogate for lost love that he'd made out of smuggled leftovers from work, road-kill...

He had learned to do with less. He had learned to make the best of what was at-hand. He had learned to adapt.

Paradise was only a couple of hours away.

He had a date tonight. He was going dancing under the stars on Halloween with a woman who could love a fucked up mess like him. A lovely blossom of womanhood created by his own hands, shaped by his own desperate need for love and acceptance. A lovely doll of a woman made of dead animal meat. His flower shaped from torn flesh. A meat orchid.

It was the last week of an Indian Summer that had held on to the autumn season far too long and it was Halloween.





# Tricky Treat

Carol MacAllister

**Marty opened the door of his halfway house** with little enthusiasm. Still numb from yesterday's unsettling mishap at work, he didn't care it was Halloween.

Two silent masked callers, one tall, the other short, stood motionless. Marty stared at the odd looking pair, then fumbled through the box of candy bars. When he reached out to drop the candy into their bags, he realized the callers had none. He hesitated. Confused, he looked again and noticed the tall one held an axe.

Marty gasped.

Suddenly, the tall one shoved the short one through the door inside the foyer.

Carol MacAllister

Marty dropped the box of candy.

The tall one pinned the short one's neck to the third step of the foyer staircase and raised the axe. With one strong downward swing, he chopped off the short one's head.

Marty screamed.

The head bounced down the steps, hit the floor and rolled around like a ball. It came to rest at Marty's feet.

Marty closed his eyes in horror.

Suddenly, the mask's elastic snapped and popped off the severed head.

Marty jumped backwards then stared down at the blood-spattered face. "Miss...Miss...Mister Thompson?"

His thoughts flashed back to yesterday at work when Thompson had entered the factory break room screaming, "That's it, Marty! You and your tall freaky friend are outta here."

Marty had replied, "But, Mr. Thompson. Gi...Gi...Give us a chance."

Thompson hollered back, "You're not producing. You're too slow. Most of the time you're covering up for Billy. You're a babbling idiot and he's just an over-sized screw-up!" Thompson shook his fist. "Why did I ever agree to place the two of you? You're just another social service fiasco!" His face reddened. "I told you before. If you can't straighten up, heads are gonna roll."

Marty had trembled and stammered, "But...But...But..."

THUD!

The sound of the fallen axe pulled Marty's thoughts back to the foyer. He stared at the bloody blade, then at the severed head. Thompson's words echoed through his mind. "Heads are gonna roll."

His glassy stare cleared. He looked up at the tall masked caller who limped out the door. "Bi...Bi...Billy? Is...is...is...that you?"

The lanky figure giggled, "Trick or Treat" as he hobbled away.



# Queen of Samhain

Louise Bohmer

**“Lord, woman,” Anna wiped Claire’s feverish brow with a damp cloth, “how this obsession has aged you. I barely recognize you.”**

A weak smile crossed the withered face of her twin. “I could have fought this wasting of my body, had the Guild not stripped me of my charms.” She ran a waxy hand down Anna’s sculpted cheek, as a violent cough seized her and pulled Claire away from the straw mattress.

Leaning forward on the hard, rail-back chair, Anna rubbed between the ailing witch’s shoulder blades. “It is not your body, but your soul that is languishing.” She brushed a lock of ginger-grey hair from her

sibling's sweat soaked neck. "I told you not to return to the woods after nightfall. Our kind is forbidden from joining in the revelries of the forest people. We are taught that from birth."

Lying back against her burlap pillow, Claire nodded and closed her glazed, green eyes. "I have betrayed the Oath of the Wise Women. I am a disgrace to the Guild."

Anna stroked the side of her sister's head and listened to her breathing deepen. "There is talk of sending you into exile."

"I know." Claire turned her head toward the small window carved into the thick wall of the two-room cabin. "I will not live to see exile. That is why I need your help."

The gnarled fingers of her feeble twin encircled Anna's wrist with a desperate strength. "I am too weakened to complete the task myself."

Rising from her chair, Anna sat beside her fragile charge on the tiny, driftwood bed. "What is it you would ask of me?"

Their eyes met, and the hunger, the madness, in Claire's sagebrush irises made her shiver. "I have trespassed in the sacred oak grove, sister." She bowed her head. "I have captured his queen."

Straightening her brown, muslin skirt, Anna folded her hands in her lap. "This is not your only secret. I know you have been to the exiles' camp, beyond the boundary of our hidden valley."

The weakened sorceress fidgeted with the dark, woolen blanket tucked across her breasts. "I know the Guild will never see my motives as valid, but you can understand my reasons can't you? I must have him." Her gaze lifted from her lap, and tears dampened her ashen cheeks. "Once you've danced with him, once you've been with him ...". She squashed her crumpled face into her palm and sobbed inside the protection of her hand. "He is like a sickness."

Standing, Anna walked to the scant pane of glass, and watched the afternoon sun filter through the furry limbs of nearby pines. "The Oak King is best forgotten, sister. You would be wise to set his consort free and let her return to the underworld, before the rising of Samhain eve."

"But I can be his queen forever, if you will help me perform the Rite of Transformation."

Anna turned to face the foolish witch, with lips pulled tight in a thin, angry slit. "That is considered a black act by the Guild. If we are caught, it could mean execution, never mind exile."

Claire's eyes darted away, but not before Anna caught the spark of lunatic hope smoldering within.

Crossing the short distance to her sister, Anna stood over the bed, folding her arms tightly across the starched bib of her apron. "How did you manage to catch the Queen of the Forest? Was this another trick the

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exiles' taught you?"

"She ascends three days before the waking of the dead at Samhain. To rouse the King from his autumn slumber in the sacred grove. To take him below to prepare for the rising of the departed. I waited for her, at the entrance of the clustered oaks ..."

"Where is she now?"

Claire shimmied up the rough headboard, clutching the meager blankets tight to her skeletal frame. "In the storage shed out back. I have shackled her in iron." Her large eyes dropped from Anna's; her cracked bottom lip trembled. "The metal will not injure her. It only binds her to a physical form."

Shaking her head, Anna sat, and wrapped her long fingers around the waning wise woman's shoulders. She stared deep into Claire's eyes, searching for a scrap of the sage, reserved woman that once dwelled within. "The exiles have taught you well indeed."

"Tell me then," she pulled back from her lost sibling, "how did you not wake the King when you took his lady?"

Claire looked away. "I was quiet and quick."

Dread built a tight cocoon around Anna's heart. She and Claire had never harbored secrets from one another. "You cloak your mind, so I cannot see your deeds, your heart."

Scowling, Anna rose from the bed and rubbed her tingling arms as she paced. Claire swung her legs over the edge of the straw mattress, and caught her about the waist as she passed.

"You still haven't answered me. Time grows short. I must have the Queen's blood before the full moon blooms this Samhain eve."

Anna pushed her away gently. Her hands fluttered to the nape of her neck, tucking wisps of coppery hair back into her loose bun. "What choice do I have?" Defeated, she dropped her head. "Without the transformation, you will perish. Tell me what I must do."

A crafty smile split the face of her dying twin. "I have the tools for the sacrifice underneath the bed. Would you bend and retrieve them for me, sister?"

Anna dipped to her knees, keeping her gaze fixed on the crazed wise woman. She tucked her arms beneath the meager cot. Her left hand fell upon something cold and metallic. The fingers of her right hand brushed against a rough, wooden surface. She gripped the hidden items and dragged them out. Her palm slipped down the onyx-handled dagger, pledged to Claire on their mother's deathbed. Beside it, sat a freshly carved birch bowl. Anna removed the silver-and-ebony dirk from its sheath and inspected the fine, steel edge.

"The blade that ends her life must be sacred to me." With a

sheepish, yet wild-eyed look, Claire leaned over the bed and scooped up the plain basin in her trembling palms.

“Stab her in the heart. It is the seat of a wood spirit’s essence. Bring the life fluid to me in this.”

Anna clipped the scabbard to a small, silver belt beneath her apron, and took the vessel Claire held out to her. “And what becomes of me, dear sister, after your transformation is complete?” She clutched the bowl tight against her chest.

Claire fiddled with the ragged neckline of her nightgown. Her gaze darted toward the worn floorboards. “I will see you safely out of the valley. I will not leave you for the wrath of the Guild.”

Hands flexing against the rounded sides of the basin, Anna let out a bitter rush of breath. “Your mortal spirit will die, Claire, as you take on the wood spirit’s form. You’ll barely remember me after the change.” Turning toward the main room of the cottage, she left the dim, cramped bedroom without a glance back at her broken twin.

The door to their shanty groaned in feeble protest, as she swung it back on its rusted hinges. A sudden, autumn wind picked up as Anna stepped out onto the makeshift stoop. Eyes narrowed, she stared at the slat board storage shed, tucked against the nearby tree line of pine and fir.

The dark, towering trees swayed in the late-afternoon breeze, brushing the roof of the shack. As Anna drew closer, she could hear the muted groans of the worn, cedar boards. She drew the dagger as her hand fell on the shed door, feeling little comfort from the weapon.

As she worked the rusted wire away from the corroded hasp, faint, guttural whispers came from within. Her fist tightened on the haft of the blade, as the crumbling cable slid from the lock and fell to the dirt at her feet. Anna dug her nails into the soft wood, and heaved the entrance open.

Inside, weak shafts of deep golden light poured through the gaps in the faded, uneven walls. Fat motes of pollen and dust floated in the thick air. And nestled in a gloomy corner, avoided by the amber sunbeams, was the Queen.

She went by many names; Queen of the Otherworld, Lady of the Dead, but her station remained constant. She was the consort of the Oak King, Lord of Abundance and Bounty. She was the dark to his light. He was the day to her night. For as long as the wise women had existed in the secret valley, they had been taught to respect this balance of woodland royalty. But Claire’s dalliance, and subsequent obsession, with the Oak King had shattered this natural equilibrium.

The Queen stood, unfurling her long, grey body as she stepped from

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the shadows. Anna stepped back and watched her slip, with unnatural grace, toward the center of the storage hut. Streaks of dusty-blue mold grew in the hollows of her sharp cheeks, and down the length of her spidery arms and legs. Fat, wormy branches of orange lichen sprouted from her scalp, and fell over her shoulders in a vivid, straggly carpet. Her eyes were wide, opaque toadstools of black. Their thick, dark caps fluttered with silent anger, shooting pebble spores that floated to the dirt floor and wriggled through the hard earth, burying themselves quickly. She was an organic universe, and Anna regarded her with quiet awe.

Her eyes dropped to the heavy, iron shackles encircling the Queen's slender, fungal wrists. Her gaze followed the lengths of chain to a fat, long spike hammered into the ground near the farthest corner of the shed.

Anna lowered to her haunches, placing the dagger and basin before her, just beyond the reach of the wood spirit. "I should set you free."

The forest monarch nodded. "You should, but you won't."

Anna frowned as the lithe, wood wisp cocked her head and gave a vague, smug smile. "Perhaps I will let you go. I could deny Claire her foolish wish. The wasting will bring death to her soon, I am sure. Her mad infatuation would end, and I would have peace of mind."

The Queen knelt in front of her, and skulked closer on all four, spongy limbs. "Aye, that would be wise."

Anna gathered the bowl and weapon into her lap and scrambled back. The lengths of chain appeared to grow, and the Queen's mossy fingers brushed up against her leg.

"But tell me, witch woman, what will make your heart ache more?" She tossed her head, and her slimy curls squirmed like slugs as they brushed across the earthen floor. "To watch your beloved twin slowly die, or to spill the blood of a forest nymph you despise?"

Anna shimmied away from the touch of her cold, rapid breath. "I do not despise you. I respect the balance your kind maintains, and the code that stands between our people."

A low, raspy cackle came from the Queen. "If you truly valued these tenets you speak of, you would not be here now, brandishing a knife and ready to pierce my heart."

Anna's hands fell from her lap, and her tools of sacrifice tumbled onto the packed dirt between them. "Why is it I cannot deny Claire? I cannot fathom the punishment that will answer this horrible crime of mine, yet I am driven to commit it for her." She cried into her open palms.

"Do not grieve, child." The Queen's rough, velvet touch caressed her neck, and she shivered. "Perhaps the Oak King was enticed as much by your sister, as she was bewitched by him. I think we both know

Claire has been practicing the black arts far longer than she will admit. Her beguiling ways have caught up with her.”

“Still, I must try to save her, wretched though she may be.” The smell of rotting pumpkins filled her nostrils, as Anna gathered up the dagger and basin and slowly stood.

Slinking back into her shadowed corner, the Queen hissed; “Just remember, witch, balance always finds a way to restore itself.”

A calm coldness spread through her body, and she plunged forward into the deep murk where the forest nymph waited. Anna went with eyes closed, letting her intuition guide her. She clutched the dirk with hands that felt awkward and young.

There came a low, sinister laugh to her left, and then her right. Coarse, icy palms cupped her neck, and a murmured chorus of jumbled words seeped into her mind. Anna concentrated on shutting out the distracting glamour. Her fingers itched against the blade.

She hollered out as she whirled around and lunged forward. The dagger found its mark and there was a wet, ripping sound. Black blood jutted from the ragged tear in the center of the Queen’s chest, spraying the front of Anna’s apron. The wood wisp shuttered, and a weak moan gurgled up from her throat. She staggered back, and slumped into a pile of soft, spoiled pumpkins from the final harvest.

Anna dropped her knife. Quiet tears spilled down her cheeks as she skittered to the corpse, jabbing the basin beneath the wound with shaky hands.

“Forgive me.” She looked into the pool of dark liquid collected, and then backed away from the fallen fay.

The shack door slammed shut behind her as she left. Anna jumped, letting out a tiny yelp. The ebony fluid sloshed dangerously close to the edge of the bowl, and she stopped to steady her grip. The moon’s silver light reflected off the murky pool, and she stared at its wavering image.

How did so much time pass? she wondered. The small hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She could not have been more than half an hour in the shed. Anna was sure of that, yet three hours of daylight had somehow slipped away. The full Samhain moon rose high over the silhouette of the distant mountains.

She pulled her attention away from the deepening, indigo sky and picked up her pace, casting a nervous glance behind her as she scampered toward the cabin. The dirt crunched beneath her feet as she drew closer, echoing like thunder in her ears.

The tip of her buttoned boot touched the porch platform as the earth beneath her trembled, and a deep rumbling came from behind her. Anna clutched the full vessel tight against her midriff, and slid her foot away

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from the stoop.

“Wise woman, what have you done?”

Her heart froze in her chest.

“Turn and face me. You must answer for your deed.” Anna held her breath until her lungs burned, preparing herself for what was to come, and then turned.

“Lift your head. I must judge your callous act by the guilt in your eyes.”

Anna obeyed, taking in the looming presence of the Oak King. His yellow, hawkish glare bore into her. His pale, birch-bark brows were drawn together in a frown of bitter sadness.

His massive, tree trunk legs brought him a step nearer. He cocked his head, and his fuzz dappled antlers traced willowy shadows across the ground in front of her, as they played with the climbing moonlight.

Anna’s eyes dropped to his snaky, clubbed feet, and she followed the trail of his white, wide roots with her gaze. They disappeared into a large, jagged hole behind him. Beyond the lip of this chasm, she spied a set of earthen stairs leading down into the underworld.

“You have killed my consort.” The words came out impassive, but she could smell the acrid despair that dripped from his undertone. “The consequences will be great.”

Her response caught in her throat, strangled by the gnarled barbs of fear. Anna dropped her head and folded her hands low against her waist. “What will you do to Claire?”

He laughed and stepped closer, wrapping his smooth, icy palm around her shoulder. “Always concern for your sister, yet what care has she for you? You’ve come to commit her crime, despite the danger it has put you in.”

Through the thick fabric of her dress, her skin tingled beneath his touch. A deep, distant pain gnawed inside her arm, spreading up her neck and down her side.

“Still, you both must pay if the balance of the forest is to be restored.”

Anna tried to cry out, but nothing came. She tried to flee, but the woodman ensnared her wrist in a feathery, branchlike grip, pulling her tight against his chest.

“A life in exchange for a life,” his thorny fingernails dug into her arm, “that is how it is with us forest people. The dead must rise tonight, attended by the Oak King and his Queen. They shall walk among the living this Samhain, as they have since time forgotten.”

“Then I must get the Queen’s blood to Claire.” She struggled to lift her face from his clammy skin. In a slow, dreamy instant, she realized

her hands were empty and wet. Somehow, she had dropped the vital life fluid.

“It is not that simple, I am afraid. Your sister must be punished, not rewarded.” The forest ruler took her chin in his hand. “Besides, my love, are your lips not already stained with the essence of my departed lady?”

His voice came through a haze, and Anna raised her fingertips to her numbed lips. They came away wet and sticky, and an unpleasant fire throbbed in her mouth.

“You,” she closed her eyes, and her head spun with a fog of frantic thought, “tricked me.”

An absent tickling crawled over her scalp, and she dug her fingers into her thick knot of hair. Her hand came away with scraps of moist flesh and russet curls clinging to it.

“What are you doing to me?” She was disconnected from the pain, and her question seemed to come from the lips of another.

“The change will not take long.” He pushed her back from him, but held fast to her arms. A wide, long-toothed grin spread across his angular face. “Be patient.”

There was a soft *pop*, and Anna’s ruined eyes dribbled down her cheeks. All went black for a moment, until jet toadstools sprouted from her emptied sockets, and she saw with the preternatural vision of a wood wisp. Something damp and coarse slithered down her neck, and slippery limbs of lichen burrowed underneath her dress, tearing the starched material away from her reshaped form.

“Can you walk, my lady?”

Whispers filled her head as he lifted her into his smooth, large arms. The cool breath of the dead brushed against her newly transformed body, as the Oak King carried her down the crumbling stairwell and into the fissure.

*Where are you going?* The protest drifted into her head, but it came weak, and almost alien, to the Queen. *What are you doing, Anna?*

In her mind, the nymph watched as Claire sat up in bed, eyes bulging with panic.

Chuckling, the Queen wrapped her newborn, moldy arms around the corded neck of her consort. “What fate awaits her, my lord?”

He kissed her pointed chin. “She will forever waste away, crippled by her mad infatuation until her body turns into a living corpse.”

She rested her head against his collarbone. “It is befitting of her transgression.”

They entered a corridor of clay, and phantom limbs reached out from their loamy tombs to stroke the face of the Queen, welcoming her. She

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brushed their wispy fingers across her lips and smiled.

“Come,” the King ducked beneath a low archway, and they entered a vast, murky chamber, “let us prepare for our ascension.”

The dead sighed in anxious agreement.





# Halloween Traditions

Jennifer Galasso

**It was that time of year again...**

The unmistakably crisp, clean, morning air entered Peter's lungs, stirring life into his dulled senses. He paused and took a deep breath, feeling the cool splendor traveling through his system, cleansing him. *Reviving him.*

The scent of apples and spice tinged sweetly with the trees. The beautiful crimsons and yellows diluted and enhanced by the deep earthiness of browns and gingers. The earth was opening up its cornucopia before retiring to the long, long death of winter.

It was time, at last, to begin his annual fall Halloween celebration. The local farm offered a haunted hayride out to the pumpkin patch

## Jennifer Galasso

and corn fields. Peter reveled in this nighttime excursion, where shudders, and mind-numbing screams floated through the darkened October sky...where he could skulk around the fields under the light of the harvest moon...

Halloween had always been his favorite holiday, ever since he was a child. Into adulthood, too old for tricks and treats, he had strived to keep the tradition alive.

He prided himself on having the scariest house in the neighborhood. Peter decked out his entire home in honor of the season. He had sought and accumulated the most repulsive and unique Halloween décor over the years, and he was proud. Very proud. The fruits of his labor...

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Peter spent the morning preparing for his nighttime expedition, where he would gather the raw materials for this year's Halloween projects. Rummaging through his basement, he found the bins marked *Halloween*, and hauled them up to his kitchen.

He pulled off the lids and removed each piece, unwrapping and holding each holiday treasure gingerly, stroking them gently. Carefully, he placed them along the kitchen counter.

Peter prepared his worktable, removing all the necessary tools from their case. It was his little ritual to begin fashioning his Halloween costume as soon as he returned from the hayride. He liked it to be traditional, but tried to make it different each and every year.

On the table, he placed a variety of knives, a pair of kitchen shears, a fresh pack of embroidering needles, a straight razor, string, and some extra paper towels.

Liking, first, to carve his pumpkin while it was still fresh from the field, he removed his carving tools from the drawer, as well as a sturdy, stainless spoon, and a bowl to catch the guts.

He stood back and ran through his mental checklist as he eyed his tools. A pot. His big stew pot was all he would need.

Peter glanced at his worktable, and smiled--everything was in place. He was ready to commence his holiday tradition...

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Dusk started to settle as Peter stepped out his front door, and walked to his car. The sky was a striking palate of calming purple and fiery orange. Peter's pulse raced with excitement. His favorite time of year...

Pulling into Donovan's Farm, he glanced at his watch. Ten minutes

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to eight. The hayride was set to leave at eight fifteen. Peter had purchased his ticket in advance.

He sat and watched, from his car, as families unloaded and rushed through the small iron gate. Children screaming, laughing, crouching behind each other, jumping out to scare...

Peter smiled, amused, at the kiddies dressed in their costumes. Spidermen, princesses, cowboys, Ninja Turtles—they were all getting into the spirit of the occasion, traditions carried, and it warmed his heart. He felt his stomach flutter with excitement.

Five past eight rolled around, and he exited his car and walked over to one of the four tractors loaded up with bales of hay. He climbed up and grabbed a spot on the last one and watched as the tension wafted through the cool, night air—so much so it was almost palpable. Fright and fun melding into one confused and vulnerable emotion.

Kids ran wildly so as not to miss the ride as the last of the passengers were loaded. They began their journey through the endless maze of corn, a dark army escorting them to terror.

The moonlight shone down on the sea of nameless faces that joggled and tousled with the bumpy ride. Laughter echoed and wavered, until Peter heard the first scream...

It cut through the night air, silencing and chilling. Peter felt his head reel with anticipation.

Another scream, and then another. Soon waves of shrieks and howls waxed and waned, quickening pulses and throbbing minds.

A figure floated out of the darkness, threatening to hijack the ride. Its face a mass of pure white, amid black attire. It came dangerously close, flying out of nowhere. The passengers flinched and yelled, clawing and screaming. Moans and wails of pure holiday excitement sated the night air. Peter drank it in, wholly, utterly, fully.

A scarecrow's eyes gleamed phosphorescent green against the blackened sky. A raven squawked and flew toward the passengers. They ducked and squealed with terror and delight just in time for the Grim Reaper to float before them, the silver light sharpening the lines of bones hidden beneath its cloak of death. A sickle twinkled like a star on that grim eve.

They arrived at their destination. As the ride came to a stop, he heard the sighs and felt the edgy aura relax...just enough to lighten the spirits and free the senses. The passengers were greeted by a vampire, ready to escort them down to the pumpkin patch. Peter sat, watching the travelers stand on shaking legs.

Carefully they stepped down from their rustic chariot. Children hopped off and ran, screaming and laughing into the night, stepping onto

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rotted pumpkins, howling with disgust as their feet slid in the foreign sludge. Parents walked delicately about the vines and mud, squatting to inspect the gourds, tossing back those they deemed unworthy.

The light of the moon shone bright and full. Peter felt the energy of this lunar power. He basked in it silently...watching. Waiting.

He looked on from an empty ride as everyone meandered through the field. He rose from his seat and descended the steps, stepping carefully into the sacred land.

\*\*\*

Walking to the back of the patch, he neared the corn maze. Children ran in and out of the stalks, howling and giggling. Parents looked on cautiously, carefully glancing back over their shoulders.

Peter entered into the corn, dodging children, brushing leaves from his path. A ghoul stuck a hand out, grabbing his arm. His heart tripping, he flicked his elbow, and kept his pace until he reached a dead end in the maze. Panting, Peter squatted. He wiped his brow of sweat, despite the cool breeze. His heart raced. His knees ached, but he stayed crouched. *Low.*

He waited for an eternity, until he heard the heady sound of voices fade as most returned to the hay cart. Only a few remained, bobbing heads wandering lost and alone.

One approached, unaware of his presence, and looked around at the sea of stalks surrounding him. Peter swallowed, feeling a lump of excitement caught in his throat.

Rising slowly, he walked toward the boy. He heard the slow, deliberate crunch of the dried vines and leaves under his feet.

His heart pounded, as he neared him, knowing that this year would be his best Halloween yet.

\*\*\*

He dragged his materials into the woods and returned with the lot back to their cars. A group of teens were heard asking, "Where's Tommy?" but they were too caught up in their own holiday fun to really care. Soon everyone left, and the lights went out. All that remained was the soft, ethereal glow of the moon and the pounding of Peter's heart.

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Back at home, he began, first, to carve his Jack O'Lantern. This

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exercise limbered up his hands for the real work to come.

After the pumpkin was carved, he lay his materials on his work table. The first thing he would need to do was shave it down—prepare it for skinning.

Taking the razor, he shaved the form completely. Soft, brown hair fell on the table and to the floor, dusting his feet. He would collect it later.

Next, he grabbed the serrated knife and plunged it deeply into the chest cavity. Taking his hands to the sternum, he cracked open the ribs. The smell of fresh blood filled his senses.

Scooping out the insides, he plopped the remnants into the large bowl he left on the table. Later, he would toss it into the food processor. It would make a nice pie.

Reaching for the finer, flexible filet knife, he gripped the frame to steady it. He moved the blade under the skin, detaching it from muscle and bone. One hand gripped the knife as the other held firm. *Stability and power*. Like carving a crude form from marble. Later he would use his finer hand. Polish and perfect his work.

After removing the hide, he spread it out, and went to work cleaning the underside, preparing it for drying. The razor blade was useful here. It was sharp and easy to maneuver over the surface without so much as a tear.

After freeing and cleaning the hide, he used his shears to cut pieces which he would sew together. These would form this year's Halloween costume.

It was now time to create his mask.

First, he used his larger knife to cut the skin around the scalp. Grabbing his array of specialty carving tools, he chose one that was small and pliable, and went to work peeling away the skin around the lids after carefully poking out the eyes--eyes that were wide with fear. *Blue eyes*. He could use them later...

The skin around the nose was delicate. He needed a careful hand and a cautious eye. Holding his breath, he went to work. He was skilled...years of this tradition proved him to be a master, as the hide was removed unscathed.

Detaching the skin from the mouth, the mask was freed from the skull. Peter cleaned it, and laid it out to be dried.

Working furiously into the night, Peter cleaned the form until nothing but bone remained. He disassembled the frame, to boil the parts, until they became blanched and pure as ivory.

Reassembling the form was tedious and required precise skill. Careful drilling, wiring and screws held the framework back in place. It

would become the focal décor.

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Standing back to view the structure he'd rebuilt, softly glowing as dusk settled on the horizon, Peter smiled. So realistic. Just a few finishing touches was all it would need.

Peter sat before the form, file in hand. He went to work on the teeth. The canines came nicely to fine, sharp points. He pressed his index finger against one and felt the sharp bite as the tooth pierced, then punctured. A drop of blood rose and capped the tip of his finger.

Fascinated, he watched it as it broke and slid down the side, falling onto the floor. He placed the finger in his mouth, and sucked the salty fluid, grinning as he saw the dab of red that remained on the fang he had fashioned.

Panting and sweating, he polished up the framework, and replaced the eyeballs, carefully wiring them in place. His hands shook with adrenaline, heart pounding in his ears, as he placed his finished masterpiece aside. Glancing outside, he saw the brilliant light of a new autumn morning. It was officially Samhain. All Hallows Eve...

He would have to wait until dark to display his creations.

\*\*\*

As the sky grew soft and purple outside, Peter saw the first of the children walking down the street. Glancing in the mirror, he eyed his reflection. His costume *was* traditional, but unique. His best one, yet. The stripped hide of his *chosen one*. A necklace of blackened fingernails, strung with hemp, adorned his neck.

He smeared his clothing with the blood of the *chosen one*, for a realistic effect. The leftover hair, the *silk*, as he liked to call it, was woven into a braid, which he attached to the underside of his ponytail. *His modest headdress*. It was time to try on the mask...

*A perfect fit.*

Walking back to the kitchen, he dimmed the lights. He lit the candle inside his Jack O'Lantern and stepped back to watch the glow. He gasped as he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, softly lit in candlelight. He stood, taking in the magnificence of his ceremonial dress.

The candlelight flickered, dancing shadows on the walls. Peter stood, in the dark, mesmerized, watching the flame illuminate the room. The blanched bones of his *chosen one* shone in the radiance. His fantastical tribute to this most precious of holidays.

## Halloween Traditions

The doorbell rang. The first of the celebrants had arrived.

Peter carried the Jack O'Lantern and placed it carefully on the table by the bowl of candy. It seemed to smile at him. It was pleased with Peter's work.

Opening the door, he took in the horrified faces of the little children, who stared, wide-eyed, at the holiday décor which adorned his porch. Jagged legs, torn shoulders, hearts and lungs, strewn about his front walk. All painstakingly preserved from his past holiday projects. All very realistic looking Halloween décor.

He laughed as they stood on his doorstep, bags wide open. Greed for candy grappling at their instinct to run.

He plunked a Kit Kat into the bag of the first child, Batman, as the kid stood trembling. The second child, Sponge Bob, having second thoughts, closed his bag and ran down the steps. The third child, The Hulk, much bolder, glanced around the porch, and then poked his head inside the doorway.

"What other creepy stuff you got in here?" he asked.

Peter laughed at the little tyke's candor. The child locked his sights on Peter's costume--a moment Peter relished deeply. The little Hulk stared, brow furrowed. Pulling up his mask, his eyes returned to Peter.

"What kinda costume is *that*?"

"It's a traditional Halloween ceremonial costume," Peter said. "I created it myself."

The child looked Peter up and down curiously. A smile crossed his lips. "It's really gross," he said. "I like it."

Peter smiled.

Turning his head, the boy's sight locked onto the cadaver. His eyes grew wide, and mouth hung slack.

"Man! Is that a *real* skeleton?"

"It sure looks to be, now doesn't it?" Peter said, smiling. "I designed it to look that way."

The little Hulk had unconsciously stepped up into Peter's doorway, gazing at the skeleton, mystified. His friends, having gotten their loot as well as their senses, had started to walk back toward the street.

"Hey guys!" the little Hulk called. His friends paused and looked back. "Come here, you gotta *see* this!"

"Nah, Billy, come on," Batman called. Sponge Bob hoofed it to the street.

Billy turned his gaze from his friends and back to the skeleton. He stared, hypnotized. Peter recognized that gleam. That *passion*.

"Why don't you come inside," Peter said, flicking off the porch light. "I'll tell you how I design all of my Halloween decorations. No one else

## Jennifer Galasso

in the world knows my techniques. It'll be our little secret.”

Billy looked up at Peter, eyed his costume, and then turned his sights back to glance around the room. Taking another step in, the door closed behind him.

Peter smiled as he would finally be able to pass on his holiday tradition...

# Trick or Treat 2005 Style

John Irvine

All Hallow's Eve has come 'round again,  
an' it really don't seem like a year,  
but I got it licked in 2005—  
this time I'm comin' out clear.

For the last few years I've made quite a loss  
as the cost of the outfittin' soars,  
and the cost of the fuel to deliver the kiddies  
just escalates—each year it's more.

This year, by crikey, we ain't askin' for treats,  
we're *demandin'* that which is our right.  
You'll give us right now what we want, or by gum,  
you'll not make it through Halloween night.

Forget the candy and chocolate, bud,  
it ain't lollies and sweeties I'm needin',  
it's ya nose drugs, ya cash and ya daughters I crave,  
so give quickly or else you'll be bleedin'.

The cute little toddlers in quaint Hallow's clothes  
demanding the goods that I seek  
have Uzis and anthrax in their Trick or Treat sacks  
and are wired to sticks of plastique.

Send out your treats an' make sure it's quick  
or that tyke with the braces'll trick ya.  
Don't be fooled by that kid with the angelic face  
'cos her switchblade'll quickly de-face ya.

Get with it, Jack, and cut out the crap—  
make sure that ya don't rock my boat.  
I'm the guy in the car away 'cross the street—  
see? I'm wavin' my wireless remote.





# Choices

Mo Irvine

**For some reason the orange rock in the distance worried her.**

Genieve had just crested the rise at a steady jog, pleased with her achievement because this time last week she had only managed to tackle this gentle but persistent slope at a fast walk. She slowed and checked her watch, pleased with her time and with her new, disciplined approach to exercise. Her fitness regime was coming along a treat.

But her eyes focused on the round orange rock in the distance, which grew steadily larger as she jogged onwards. Her mind had registered its presence primarily because it hadn't been there when she passed this way the day before. She filed this information away as mildly interesting.

Yet something about it continued to nag the quiet corners of her brain. She drew closer, and saw the orange rock for what it was, a bloated orange pumpkin. It was the middle of summer. There just shouldn't *be* any large ripe orange pumpkins around yet.

As Genieve neared the huge vegetable she noticed something else was out of place. The pumpkin wasn't only fully ripe, but had been carved into a Halloween face. The insides had been carefully scraped out, eyes, nose and mouth traditionally defined, and the lid placed neatly back on top, like a hat. It had sagged a little, and was showing the first signs of decomposition. The inside, instead of bright orange, was a slimy darkish grey; patches of pale mould had sprung on the outer skin, and the mouth curled inwards like the mouth of an old man who has lost his teeth. Despite the growing warmth of the morning, Genieve shivered.

She knelt and peered more closely at the vegetable, reaching out a hand to touch it. But something, some inner caution, made her draw her hand back sharply, as if afraid the sunken mouth would suddenly sprout real teeth and sink them into her tender flesh, severing the fingers, and leaving bloody shards of white bone pointing out from ragged flesh.

Scrambling to her feet, Genieve backed onto the track once more, then, turning, set off up the hill at a fast walk, breaking into a slow jog after a hundred yards. She didn't look back, but all the way to the next bend in the track, she felt as if eyes were watching her frightened progress, leering at her, mocking the fact that she was running away.

***Run, woman, run away, run, run, run...***

It was the wind, she told herself, nothing more than the wind blowing across the land. But she shivered, and ran faster, beads of sweat sprouting on bare arms where goosebumps had formed.

After another twenty minutes, Genieve made it to the farm gate at the top of the hill, which marked not only the property boundary but also the turning point for her morning jog. She jogged in place for a couple of minutes before slowing her pace and coming to a halt. Unslinging her small backpack, she took several sips of water from a plastic bottle, leaning with her back to the gate and surveying the view.

From here, she could see down the valley to the sea, almost a thousand feet below her. Today the water was turquoise, reflecting the brilliant sky, which was untouched by clouds. Out on the water she saw two small sailboats bobbing gently, looking like toys from this distance. The neighbours' children were out early with the tide, enjoying their school holidays and relishing the sunshine.

The track she had just climbed coiled below her in a series of curves as it snaked its way to the bay. At this early hour, the hillsides beneath her were banded golden ochre and blue-grey, still striped in alternate

## Choices

light and shade until the sun rose higher in the sky and bathed everything with its warming rays.

And there, just visible beyond a turn in the track and disturbing in its clarity, sat the orange pumpkin, squatting in a patch of bare earth at the side of the shingle road.

Genieve squinted as if to focus more clearly. As she did so she saw the pumpkin roll off the earth and join the track, where it stopped, almost as if sniffing for a scent, before rolling onwards once more and disappearing out of sight.

Genieve shook herself and gave a little laugh. *Impossible!* She told herself. *You're imagining it. The thing has to weigh at least twenty pounds! More like thirty. You must've been looking in the wrong place; that was something else.*

Another voice in her brain argued back. *You know damn well that's the right spot, it's the second bend after the rise...* Genieve chewed her lip doubtfully and shaded her eyes, but the orange vegetable was no longer in sight. She kept her eyes fixed firmly on the track, however, and barely two minutes later the pumpkin came into view, steadily rolling along the middle of the track towards her. Uphill.

Genieve plonked down onto the ground, no longer sure her legs could support her.

*It has to be a trick. The kids next door are just playing a silly trick.* She raised her eyes and looked out to the bay, where she could still see the neighbours' children—surely all of them—out in their dinghies, sails flapping uselessly as they bobbed on the calm water.

Her eyes flicked back to the farm track, and she caught a flash of orange as the pumpkin rounded another bend and slowly proceeded up the hill.

***Get you...coming to get you...***

*Just the wind,* she told herself firmly, but she shivered, crossing her arms across her front and cupping her elbows.

Genieve sat like that for several minutes, listening to two internal voices, one of reason, and the other, fear, arguing steadily. Reason asserted there must be a logical explanation, and that the pumpkin must be a trick, a robotic device, set in motion to scare the unheeding passer-by. But, Fear countered, who else passed this way so early in the morning except for she? Her fitness program never wavered, and she always jogged to the top gate and back before breakfast. *Aha!* pounced Reason. There you have it! *It is a trick!* The neighbours' kids have somehow set it up to scare you. They know your routine, after all.

Genieve looked down at the track again, and saw nothing but rolling, golden-green hillsides dotted with her father's placid Red Devon beef herd.

Retrieving her water bottle, she took a long drink then firmly screwed the cap back on. She grabbed the gate, heaved herself to her feet. Replacing the bottle in her backpack, she shrugged her arms back into it, settled the straps, and set off slowly back down the hill.

*Hee hee hee...*

*The wind!* She told herself, gritting her teeth and picking up her pace. The sun was hot on her arms but she was still shivering. She broke into a slow jog, watching her feet lest she slip on the loose gravel.

After ten minutes, having seen nothing more sinister than grazing cattle, Genieve eased her pace to a walk. The sun behind her was higher in the sky now, and she could feel it burning the back of her neck. She retrieved her water and splashed a little over her head and neck, and the coldness was soothing on her hot skin.

Rounding the next bend, she saw it, sitting in the middle of the road. It looked like some malevolent toad, waiting for someone to touch it so that its skin could erupt and spill out poison.

A scream crawled from her lips, before she could stop it. She twisted her ankle painfully on a stone. *Don't fall!* she admonished herself, somehow sure that if she did, she'd never be allowed to get up again. She steadied herself, gingerly rubbing her ankle, all the time her eyes never leaving that orange vegetable. It seemed to be *daring* her to come closer.

Genieve risked a glance around, to see whether anyone could be hiding nearby and controlling this thing, laughing to themselves at her discomfort and stupidity. The nearest stand of trees was five hundred yards away, and there were no rocks large enough to hide even a small child. Cattle grazed, unconcerned, up the hillside, but none were near the track. She was on her own.

She had two choices. She could give in to her fear, turn, and go back up the track. Once at the top gate she could jog three miles to the next farm entrance. From there, she would have a further six-mile journey before she reached home. Fear liked this suggestion very much, and urged her to *do it, do it now, turn around and run like hell!*

Reason interjected and told her not to be so ridiculous. Was she really going to contemplate running an extra nine or ten miles, just because she was afraid of a vegetable sitting in the road? *Please!* Reason said, in a voice of disbelief.

Genieve rotated her twisted ankle and found that it didn't pain her much. She jogged gently on the spot, regarding the inanimate vegetable that sat in the road with its scabrous face, sharp eyes and sunken mouth.

## Choices

“Just an ordinary old pumpkin,” she muttered. “Just a trick. Just an old pumpkin.”

With that, she gathered speed, ran forward, and leapt high over the pumpkin, holding her breath, fully expecting something to grab her legs and pull her down, devour her flesh, chew her bones...

She landed, wincing at the pain in her ankle, then jogged on before looking back over her shoulder. The pumpkin was still in the same spot. Genieve laughed, feeling stupid. “Just a silly old vegetable,” she said again, slowing her pace and rounding the next bend. She looked back and saw nothing but an empty track bordered by gold-green grass. She laughed out loud.

Running on, she saw the farmhouse chimney through the treetops. She heard the shouts and laughter of the children out in their boats, and the slap of the sea against the rocks. In the clear sky, a plane droned overhead, its body a pinprick in the distance. Her father was mending a broken fence post in a nearby field. He turned at the sound of her footsteps, and waved cheerily.

Even as she waved back, she saw the smile freeze on his face. She heard the monstrous noise rushing up behind her, sounding like the chattering of steel blades—or teeth. Louder and louder until the sound overwhelmed her, and she knew she should have gone the other way.





# Three For the Road

B.P. Wap

**“Maynard, who is it?” Wilson asks.**

He doesn’t answer his partner—he can’t.

Across the street, his wife runs from one uniformed officer to the next, pleading for someone to tell her what is going on. Detective Martin finally pulls her aside and ushers her behind a patrol car.

Her anguished screams pierce the night.

A few feet away, two gaunt paramedics load his son’s body into the ambulance. One chuckles at the other’s joke.

Tossing the phone onto the floor, Maynard stands and staggers away from the chaos, away from the shambles of his life. His hands feel numb, but he's still able to work his cold, clammy fingers into his pocket. He soon finds what he is looking for and he holds it up to read.

The name neatly printed on the back of the card reads *Rellik*—  
—which is, of course, *killer* spelled backward.

The phone number beneath is Maynard's home number.

He can't help but grin as he unsnaps the catch on his holster. Trick or treat.

He'd been tricked good.

"Jack, no!" Wilson screams. His voice sounds distant, like ocean waves in seashell.

As Maynard thinks back, his chest clenches. He was so close. Putting the gun to his head, he tugs the trigger.

\*\*\*

"He's up there—I'm sure of it." The husky man pointed at the building with white-gloved hands.

Running his fingers through his thinning brown hair, Detective Maynard tried to ignore the fact that he was talking to a clown. When juxtaposed with the current situation, the informant's attire was heinously inappropriate.

"Sorry," the man said as he noticed Maynard's disapproving glare. "I'm on my way to a Halloween party."

"Alright," the detective growled. "But I need to know where to reach you." He handed over a card and pen. "Jot down the name and number of where you'll be."

Using the wall for support, the clown quickly scribbled the information.

A uniformed officer jogged over. "Detective, we're ready to move in."

"Here," the clown said as he handed over the card. The corner of his mouth twitched subtly.

Maynard snatched the card away and deposited it in his pocket. "You'd best get away from here before the fireworks start."

"I plan to," the clown called as he shouldered his bag and moved down the alley. "Goodnight, and happy Samhain, Detective."

\*\*\*

## Three for the Road

The officers stormed the building from every possible entrance or exit in an impressive show of coordinated force. Windows shattered and doors crumpled in their path as they flooded the tiny third-floor apartment. Guns drawn, their adrenaline pumping, they made a rapid search of the cramped quarters.

A cigarette—still smoldering—burned down on the lip of a beer can.

In the toilet, a thick foamy head of fresh urine filled the bowl.

The table was scattered with tubes of cream makeup and palettes of grease paint.

But the killer was nowhere in sight.

“Where the hell is he?” Wilson called as he finished checking the bedroom.

“I think the place is empty, sir. They haven’t found anything in the other rooms.”

Wilson shivered at the thought of the child killer roaming the streets on Halloween. God only knew how many more bodies he could add to his record-breaking total. Detective Maynard would be furious. Maynard had been trailing the serial killer for months, and now it looked like the fiend had slipped away. Wilson doubted that they would get another chance to capture him.

The other officer joined him in the bedroom. “They’re searching the rest of the building now. If he’s here, we’ll get him.”

With a despondent nod, Wilson squinted as he noticed something of interest. A piece of white paper had been taped to the desk. It was another of the bastard’s taunting letters. Moving in, he immediately recognized the immaculate handwriting of the man the media had dubbed *The Sandman*. Although it was addressed to Detective Maynard, Wilson couldn’t help but read it:

*My dearest Detective Maynard,*

*So close yet so far, my friend. But don’t fret. I wouldn’t leave town without first repaying you for your fine hospitality. You see, I’ll be making a stop before I leave. It seems that I have a celebration to attend! And don’t you worry. I’ll be sure to bring a gift. How appropriate that, on a day to mark beginnings, one should meet his end.*

*The Sandman*

Taped to the bottom of the letter was an invitation to child’s birthday party.

\*\*\*

“Oh, come on, Mom. You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason whined. “I’m suppose to meet Nancy in five minutes!”

“I’m sorry, Jason, but I need to run out and get a cake. Your father was supposed to bring one home, but he had to take a call. We can’t have a birthday party without a cake.” She hurried through the downstairs, grabbing her purse and coat. “I promise I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“But mom—“

“—Enough! It’s you’re brother’s birthday. I think that it’s the least you could do.” Her severe tone severed any hopes of continuing the discussion. “Besides, I have an entertainer coming in a little while. I’m sure he’ll keep the kids occupied.”

Jason realized that any more recalcitrance would likely get him grounded. Resigned, he hung his head in defeat.

\*\*\*

Maynard didn’t get it. Their contact had phoned just moments before and said that their man was in his apartment. His men had mobilize quickly and moved quicker, yet their trap had ensnared nothing. He and about two-dozen fellow officers were left to linger—the egg on their faces quite rotten.

“It’s empty, sir,” a uniform informed.

“Tell them to go door to door. Ask if anyone has seen anything. I want this place searched thoroughly.”

“Yes sir.” The officer darted back up the alley.

Moving through the parked cruisers, he made his way to the barricades blocking off the short alley.

A crowd of curious bystanders had amassed in the street. Dozens of people—many in costume—craned their necks to get a look at the third story apartment. They waited eagerly for the police to emerge with their suspect in handcuffs.

Boy, would they be disappointed.

The detective knew there was a chance that their boy was still close. He might even be standing in the crowd. Haughty to a fault, he would want to linger and revel in his victory and their frustration.

“What’s going on up there?” someone called.

He turned to see a werewolf waving a hairy paw from a few rows back. “Police business.”

“Did you get him?” The query came from a witch.

“Just stay back,” was his reply.

The witch shrugged and moved off.

It was going to be a long night.

## Three for the Road

\*\*\*

The children began arriving at eight, just like Mom said they would.

"But we don't want to wait in the living room," Johnny whined.

"I don't care. Mom left me in charge and I want you and your little friends in there and out of my sight." Jason led his brother and his friends into the den. "Now, you guys just wait here patiently. Mom will be back in a little while. She has a surprise coming for you tonight, and I'd hate for you guys to miss it."

In the hallway, the phone rang.

"This is boring," one of the boys complained. Dressed as a zombie, he fidgeted with his rubber hands.

"Here," Jason spurted. Tearing open a bag of candy, he tossed it to the living dead. "Munch on these for a while."

The children ravaged the bag like a pack of wild animals. Shutting the door behind him, he raced to the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey sweetie! I've been over here waiting for you. Are you coming or what?"

"I'm going to be a little late."

\*\*\*

"Detective, could you come here for a minute, please?" Wilson called from the fire escape.

Wilson never said please. Maynard left the swelling crowd behind as he bound up the narrow steps, two at a time.

The apartment (could it be called an apartment really? It was more a hovel) reeked of corruption and death. Skirting around two kneeling forensic men, he made for the bedroom. The detective swept the beaded curtain aside as he entered. Cramped and bare, it contained only a steel-framed cot and a small oak desk. A cracked table lamp, recklessly placed on the floor, provided the ruddy luminance. Pornography papered the crumbling plaster walls, and the detective couldn't help but notice that much of it involved children.

"What is it?" he asked as he joined the other men at the desk.

The uniformed officer stared at Wilson with uncertainty in his eyes.

"I think that you should see this," Wilson said as he stepped out of the way.

Leaning in, the detective read the cursed words.

\*\*\*

Jason set the phone down as he opened the front door.

The clown stood on the porch, his broad face painted in a colorful expression of joviality. His white-gloved hands clenched a large canvas duffel bag. Crimson lips parting, he prepared to speak.

"I take it you're the entertainment," Jason asked, cutting him off.

The clown narrowed his eyes in confusion. Looking over both shoulders, he turned to Jason and smiled. "Well, I guess that I *am* too old for trick-or-treating."

"Very funny," he said as he rolled his eyes. Leading the clown into the foyer, he directed him to the den. "They're all in there. And let me warn you; they've already plowed through two bags of Snickers, so they're running on fifth gear."

"Thanks for the heads up. Don't worry, I'll knock 'em dead." Without another word, he shuffled down the hall to the den and opened the door.

A chorus of cheers and claps shook the house.

\*\*\*

"Give me the keys to your car," Detective Maynard ordered as he sprinted to the door.

The officer looked confused, but tossed him the keys nonetheless.

Hurdling the rusted rail, he meandered though the parked cars until he reached the one at the end of the alley. As he stabbed the key into the ignition, he fumbled through his overcoat pocket. Producing his phone, he flipped it open one-handedly and punched in the familiar digits.

"Shit," he yelled as he got a busy signal.

Rattled by a crippling sense helplessness, he floored the gas pedal as he clicked *redial*.

\*\*\*

Jason twisted the phone chord around his finger as he waited for Nancy to return. Finally, there was a soft click and a muffled sigh. "Sorry about that." Her words were quick and breathy.

"Trick-or-treaters?" he asked.

"A whole giggling horde of them. Cuties, though. One little girl was dressed in a little power suit. God, she couldn't have been eight. When I ask her who she was supposed to be, she told me the president! Isn't that cute?"

"Adorable," was his halfhearted response.

### Three for the Road

The living room erupted into high-pitched squeals and nervous laughter.

“What was that?” Nancy asked.

“The clown,” he said as he peaked around the corner.

The living room door was cracked open, and the firework-like flashes of a strobe light flickered within. His head already ached, and the repetitive bursts pounded his eyes like hammers. Cradling the phone between his head and shoulder he reached for the door.

It opened, striking his foot, and the latex physiognomy of a witch filled the narrow breach. Stage blood trickled down her green forehead, puddling on the gnarled chin.

“Shit!” he spat. “You scared me!” Placing his hand on the creature’s hooded head, he shoved it back in. “Now get back in there and have fun. That’s what he’s being paid for.”

Jason waited for another attempted escape, but none came. The room was still.

“God damn kids,” he mumbled as he wiped the crimson from his hand.

\*\*\*

The detective slammed on the brakes as a trio of little monsters sprinted across the street in front of him.

“Come on!” he yelled in frustration as he honked the horn.

Startled, the children hustled out of the way.

As the detective resumed his drive, he glanced in the rearview.

A skeleton was flipping him a bony bird.

\*\*\*

The clown finally reemerged, his bag dragging beside him. Pausing in the doorway, he wadded up his clown top and shoved it deep into the bag. Rivulets of sweat gathered on his rumpled forehead, and one black triangular eye was slightly smudged. All things considered, he looked fairly well intact for someone who had just braved a room of rabid eight-year-olds.

“All set?”

“What a group.” The clown smoothed over his t-shirt—it read *Smithy Elementary School*. Dark, wet stains graced each underarm.

“Did my mom pay you already?”

## B.P. Wap

The clown nodded. “Oh, yeah. We’re paid in full.” Hefting his bag over his meaty shoulder, he made for the door. “Happy Halloween,” he called.

“Yeah, you too,” was Jason’s wan reply.

Outside, the sound of children’s laughter mingled with the howl of a sharp October breeze.

“They’re awfully quiet in there.” Jason closed the front door and listened for the anticipated sounds of play and laughter.

With the exception of the soft tick of the grandfather clock, the home was silent.

*I’d better go check on them.*

\*\*\*

Maynard’s cell phone rang, its cheery tune muffled against the fabric of the passenger seat.

Out of habit, he snatched it up. “Maynard.”

“It’s Wilson. Listen to me—we have three cars headed to your house now.”

“They’ll be too late.”

“You don’t know that. If they’re not there by the time you arrive, wait until—”

“Wait? That psycho might be with my family right now, and you want me to wait? I don’t think so.”

“But—”

The detective clicked *end* and closed the phone. Three blocks separated him from his home and from the knowledge that would either mean his salvation or damnation.

\*\*\*

“JESUS FUCKING CRIST! HELP ME!” Leaping down the steps, Jason plowed through a trio of tiny masqueraders as he sprinted towards the road.

“Look at that!” one of the children—a tiny witch—yelled. She pointed to the porch.

A set of crimson footprints glistened in the porch light.

“Cool,” Dracula said.

\*\*\*

### Three for the Road

Tires slipping on the wet leaves, Maynard fought to control the car as it careened around the corner. Missing the back of a parked car by inches, he veered across the narrow street.

Maynard barely had time to register the figure running down the center of the road before his car slammed into it.

"Christ," he spat as the body flopped over the hood and smashed into the windshield. Jamming on the brakes, the detective brought the car to a screeching halt.

Maynard exploded from the car and rounded the front. "Oh God, no!"

His son Jason lay on the hood; his body semi emerged in the shattered windshield. Blood bubbled from his lips and pooled on the Crown Vic's dented hood. With a watery cough, he tried to speak.

Rushing to his son's side, he took his hand. "You were in the middle of the road, Jason. What were you doing?"

"He killed them, Dad. I'm so sorry...I didn't know." Blood speckled his teeth and frothed on his lips.

"And Johnny? Is he..."

The boy sobbed. "It was the clown."

"It'll be okay. I'll call and ambulance and we'll get you some help."

Jason didn't respond. Mouth agape, he stared off into the night with lifeless blue eyes.

Maynard screamed in anguish. The clown. He had stood toe to toe with the Sandman and he hadn't known it. And now...

Tears filling his eyes, he turned from his son's body and trudged toward his house.

A van sat parked directly across the street from his house. Cloaked in its shadow, someone stood watching him.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" he screamed. "Is this entertaining to you?"

The figure stepped into the yellow glow of the streetlight and made for the house.

"You fucker," Maynard seethed as he saw the white greasepaint, the thick red smile...Unholstering his pistol, he broke into a sprint. "I'll kill you!"

The clown turned.

The first shot struck the van's grill. The second struck the clown behind the knee. With a yelp, the fiend toppled to the ground. "Oh, God!"

"Ha!" Slowing his pace, Maynard took aim and pulled the trigger.

A bloody rose bloomed on the clown's left shoulder.

"Please," he begged as he tried to drag himself to safety.

## B.P. Wap

“Where you going, Mr. Sandman?” Maynard fired twice more, striking the clown in the back.

The wail of sirens filled the air, and the first of his backup squealed around the corner.

Pinning the villain down with his foot, Maynard took aim at the back of his head and unloaded the rest of his clip.

\*\*\*

“God, Frank,” Wilson said as he struggled for words. “What a mess. Are you okay?”

Maynard sat in the back of the patrol car watching the cops hustle to and fro like ants at a picnic. “I got him, Wilson. I got that fucker good.”

“You sure did, buddy.” His eyes glistened with emotion. “They’re going to need dental records to determine his identity.”

“Fuck his identity—it doesn’t matter. What matters is that he’s dead.”

Wilson nodded.

Maynard jumped as his phone rang. With a mechanical motion, he picked it up. Putting the receiver to his ear, he listened.

“Hello Detective Maynard.” The familiar voice seemed eternally distant.

“Who is this?” he asked, his voice weak and unsure.

“They call me the Sandman.”

Blood cooling in his veins, Maynard growled, “The Sandman’s dead.”

“I hate to break it to you, my friend, but I’m alive and well. Unfortunately, the same can’t be said for the entertainer your wife hired.”

The detective repressed the urge to vomit as he watched the forensic crew scramble around the body of the slain clown.

“You had me, my friend, but you failed to see the forest through the trees. Play it back in your mind, Detective. Rewind, and you’ll see just how close you got. You could have stopped me, stopped all of this.”

Maynard’s lower lip trembled.

“You’ve gotten closer to me than anyone—you should be proud of that. But now the game’s done and it’s time for me to go.”

“What’s wrong, Frank? Who is it?” Wilson asked.

Maynard didn’t answer as his emotions boiled.

“Goodnight, and happy Samhain, detective.”

The phone went dead.

## Three for the Road

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The fiend they called the Sandman stands in the murky umber of a hulking oak as he watches the detective's suicide with maleficent glee.

"What are you doing, Mister?" a tiny voice asks.

He turns to find a trio of trick-or-treaters standing behind him. "I'm trying to get this sack of candy to my van," he replies as he lifts his heavy bag.

"That's *all* candy?" A toe-head angel asks.

"Why, yes it is. I'll share it if you help me."

She looks to her friends—a ninja and a pumpkin--m to see what they think.

The both smile as they nod their heads.

"We'll help," she says as she places a tiny hand on the bag.

"Three for the road," the Sandman mutters as he folds his cell phone.



Happy  
Halloween!

FROM THE

*Wicked  
Karnival*